5 Ways Workplace Culture is Different Around the World

Different ways workplace culture around the world are examined and what are the similarities facing working professionals in today's global business climate.

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Recently, I had the opportunity to take the trip of a lifetime. As a graduate student at Montclair State University, I was given the option to spend ten days overseas. The options were either Beijing and Seoul or Barcelona and Prague. Since I had already been to Europe, I was eager to venture into Asia for the first time in my life. As a business student and professional, I was most looking forward to learning about the differences in workplace culture. In addition to experiencing the food and lifestyle, of course. What, if any differences in the day-to-day activities would I be able to notice between working professionals in both China and South Korea? Growing up it was understood that elementary, middle, and high school students in many Asian countries spent more hours in class compared to American students. I wondered how this translated into the workplace and affected work ethic. How do professionals in China, South Korea, Japan, India, and most Western European nations compare to us in the United States? I learned a few things while on my trip and continued my research when I

returned home to America. Here are the top five ways I've found workplace culture differs around the world..

Mid-Day Napping is Encouraged in Japan

A few months back, I was surprised and admittedly jealous to read an article featured in The Guardian discussing a common workplace occurrence in Japan called "inemuri." Better known as "present while sleeping," or to Americans, as mid-day naps in the office. The belief amongst the Japanese is taking a mid-day nap at work is a sign of hard work and commitment. The article goes into greater detail about the practice of inemuri, and the rules that have allowed it to become socially acceptable in the Japanese workplace culture. For example, the higher your position within an organization, the more accepted it would be for you to practice inemuri. It's also worth noting that unlike a new common occurrence at certain tech firms in Silicon Valley with designed napping stations, inemuri is only accepted at your desk.

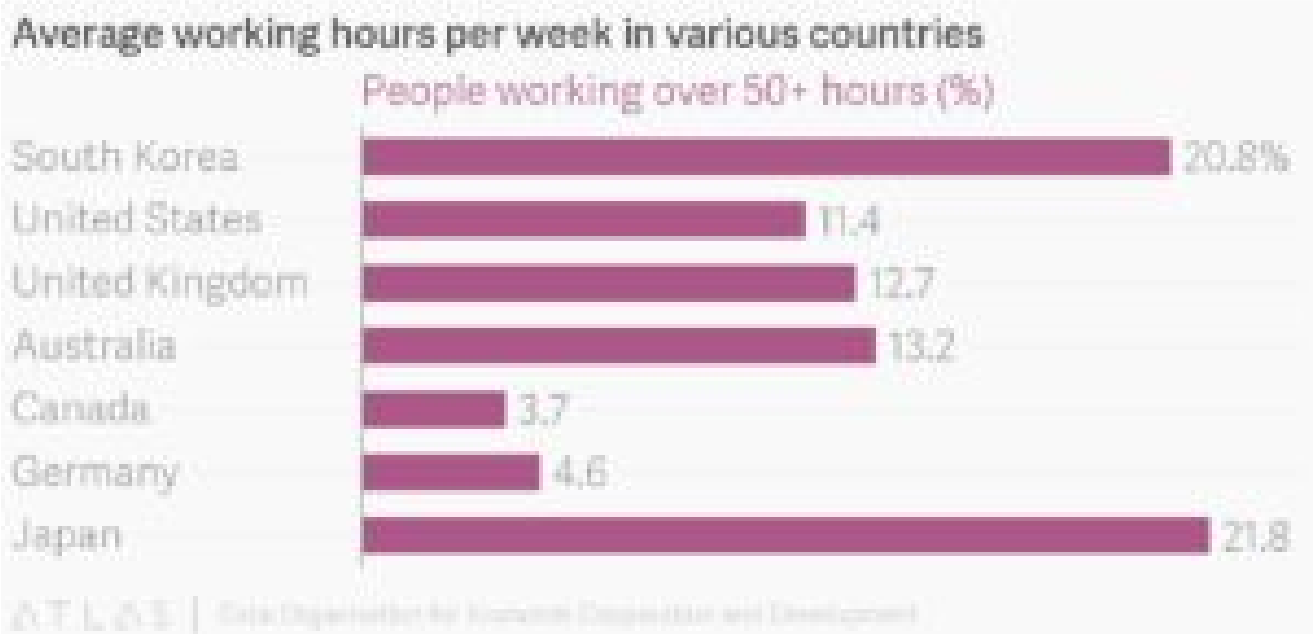
Employees are Required to Disconnect from Work After Hours in France

With information at our fingertips, like sending and receiving email, the concept of "work-life balance" has become a common discussion amongst many HR professionals. Employee burnout is a real medical condition and a growing concern for many companies. In France, employees notoriously enjoy a 35-hour work week and a minimum of five weeks of vacation. The Government recently passed a new policy which allows employees the *right to disconnect* from work-related email and other methods of communication when they are not present in the office. In fact, according to a recent SHRM article, French-based organizations with over 50 employees must negotiate agreements with unions to allow employees to disconnect after work hours. According to the article, the policy is only provided to salaried employees who work at least 218 days per year.

In South Korea Expect to Work Long Hours

Upon landing in Seoul, our tour guide began highlighting the largest corporations headquartered in South Korea. As you can imagine, we discussed well-known organizations and their economic impact on the region, such as the Hyundai Motor Company, Samsung, and LG. According to the World Bank, South Korea has the 11th largest GDP. This is a very impressive economic feat for a country the size of Indiana and with close to 70% of the peninsula covered by mountains. Similar to France, the South Korean Government has increasingly become concerned about its citizens working too many hours. A recent article featured in CNN discussed the term "gwarosa," the Korean word meaning death by overwork. The article looks at the hazardous working habits of South Koreans as they work more hours every week than most countries do. In South Korea, this extends beyond the workforce as most students spend 14 hours in the classroom, starting at the age of eleven. Based on the competitive

nature of the country and demands from some of the largest companies, these firms have put a premium on employee dedication. Last year, a new law was put in place for office workers that would lower their workweek from 68 hours a week to 40 hours with 12 hours of overtime pay. However, the mandate for this new law is only applicable to companies with over 300 employees.



Be Prepared to Dress Sharply for Business Meetings in Brazil

While in Graduate School, I met an international student from Brazil. Having never been to Brazil myself, I often asked her about the business culture. Immediately, without any hesitation, she would inform me that in Brazil, business etiquette is important. She told me that Brazilians, dating back to her grandmother's generation, take great pride in how well they dress. Both socially and in a business setting. Clothing, along with surgical enhancements and jewelry, are a sign of status and power. A USA Today article details that clothing worn is almost as important as the context of the actual business meeting in Brazil. Men are expected to wear their best suit with a tie. Preferably dark gray or navy, and polished dress shoes. In many large Brazilian organizations, executives are expected to wear three-piece suits. Women are expected to wear either dress pants or an appropriate length dress. They are also required to look elegant in any business setting. Referred to as "dressing like a clown," it's strongly recommended to never enter a business meeting wearing the Brazilian national colors of green and yellow.

Hierarchy in India is Very Important

I discussed the differences in business culture in India with a colleague of mine here at Viventium whose parents spent their careers working in India. She was adamant in describing how important hierarchy is to the culture. In India, there is a firm belief in paying the highest amount of respect to

elders. That belief is not different in the workplace. During our conversation, she went into further detail describing the differences we have grown accustomed to here in the United States. Especially how common it's for upper management to socialize with their team members. The professional social environment in India is not as prominent as it is in the United States. A clear division exists between management and the rest of the employees. Upper management does not socialize with subordinate employees. A meeting must be agreed upon for any communication to exist during the workday.

What Does This All Mean for Workplace Culture?

From an HR perspective, there is one critical underlying similarity that cannot be ignored. Many working professionals are choosing to spend too much time during their workweek attached to their job responsibilities. Many countries not only believe it's not healthy but are even enacting legislation to help prevent this. Whether flexible hours work for your organization or not, it's good to know trending topics that are being discussed on a global level. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has published similar articles in the past referencing overworked employees.

- Today's Young Worker is Stressed Out and Anxious - SHRM
- Workplace Burnout at "Epidemic Proportions" - SHRM
- How to Prevent Employee Burnout - SHRM

The other takeaway is that by exposing ourselves to different workplace cultures; we can incorporate ideas to be used even in a small way. For example, sending an email to an employee about leave on vacation saying, "please take this time to disconnect from work and enjoy your time off truly." This would mean the world to an employee who may otherwise feel obligated to be checking in while away. We are always trying new things at work to keep employees engaged. Viventium CMO Terra Vicario shares her thoughts in this Fast Company article, "4 creative ideas to make Mondays more fun for your team." Maybe these global trends will spark some new ideas.

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