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Workhorses of culture research - employee surveys and questionnaires - are often unreliable. The new approach to language learning, which employees use in electronic communication, has opened a new window into organizational culture. Research analysis of email, Slack messages and Glassdoor posting is a challenging task of prevailing wisdom about culture. The findings of the cultural fit are important, but what predicts success is most the speed at which employees adapt as organizational culture changes over time. Cognitive diversity helps teams during the idea, but hinders execution. The best cultures encourage diversity to stimulate innovation, but based on shared core beliefs. Business culture can catalyze or undermine success. However, the tools available to measure it, namely employee surveys and questionnaires, have significant drawbacks. Employees' independent reports are often unreliable. The values and beliefs that people say are important to them, for example, often not reflected in how they actually behave. In addition, surveys provide static or, at best, episodic images of organizations that are constantly evolving. And they are limited by the tendency of researchers to believe that distinctive and idiosyncratic cultures can be neatly classified into several common types. Our research focuses on a new method of evaluating and measuring organizational culture. We've used big data processing to refine the ubiquitous digital footprints of culture in electronic communications, such as emails, Slack messages, and Glassdoor reviews. By studying the language that employees use in these communications, we can measure how culture actually affects their thoughts and behavior at work. In one study, two of us collaborated with a medium-sized company to assess the degree of cultural fit between employees and their colleagues based on the similarity of linguistic style expressed in internal e-mails. In a separate study, two two analyzed the contents of Slack's messages exchanged between members of nearly 120 software development teams. We studied the variety of thoughts, ideas and meanings expressed by team members, and then measured whether it is beneficial or harmful to teamwork. We also partner with employers review site Glassdoor to analyze how employees talk about the culture of their organizations in anonymous reviews to explore the impact of cultural diversity on organizational efficiency and innovation. Jean-Pierre Attal/Courtesy of Galerie Olivier Waltman Explosion of digital trace data such as emails and Slack communications - along with the availability of computational techniques that are faster, cheaper and easier to use - has opened up a new scientific approach to measuring culture. Our computational-linguistic approach challenges the prevailing assumptions in people's analytics and reveals new insights into how managers can use culture as a strategic resource. We believe that with appropriate measures to protect employee privacy and minimize algorithmic bias it has great promise as a tool for managers grappling with cultural issues in their firms. Research Our recent research has focused on cultural fitness versus adaptability, the pros and cons of setting in, cognitive diversity, and the impact of diversity on organizational performance. Let's look at each of them in detail. Suitable against adaptability. When managers think about employment for a cultural fit, they focus almost exclusively on whether candidates reflect the values, norms and behavior of a team or organization as it currently exists. They often do not consider cultural adaptability - the ability to quickly learn and conform to organizational cultural norms as they change over time. In a recent study conducted by two of us with B. V. Govind Manian of Stanford and Christopher Potts analyzed how cultural fit and cultural adaptability affect individual work at a high-tech company, comparing the linguistic styles expressed in more than 10 million internal e-mails exchanged over five years. For example, we looked at the extent to which an employee used obscene words when communicating with colleagues who themselves often cursed or used personal pronouns (me or me) that corresponded to those used by her peer group. We also tracked how employees eventually adapted to the cultural conventions of their peers. We found, as expected, that the high level of cultural fit led to more promotion, more performance scores, higher bonuses, and fewer involuntary departures. Cultural adaptability, however, has proved even more important for success. Workers who were able to quickly adapt to cultural norms as they changed over time were more successful than employees who exhibited a high cultural fit when first hired. These cultural cultural have been better prepared for changing or developing cultural norms, which is common in organizations operating in rapidly changing, dynamic environments. These results show that the process of cultural alignment does not end at the point of employment. Indeed, our study also found that employees followed certain trajectories of enculturation - at certain times in their tenure demonstrating a more cultural fit with colleagues, and at other times less. Most end up adapted to the behavioral norms of their peers, and those who stayed in their company exhibited an increase in cultural fit over time. The workers who were eventually laid off were those who could not adapt to the culture. The workers who left voluntarily were the most fascinating: they quickly adapted culturally at the beginning of their tenure, but later stepped out of the way and would probably leave the firm as soon as they were cultural outsiders. To further assess how cultural fit and adaptability affect performance, Berkeley's Jennifer Chatman and Richard Lu and two of us interviewed employees at the same high-tech company to measure the value of congruence (the extent to which employees' core values and beliefs about a desirable workplace fit into their peers) and perceptions of congruence (how well employees can read cultural code, accurately reporting the values of conducted by colleagues). We found that cost congruence is predictable witholding employees with it less likely to voluntarily leave the company, but not related to work. We found that the reverse perception of congruence is true: It is predictively higher performance work, but not associated with retention. These results show that companies seeking to create a stable and dedicated work should focus on hiring candidates who share similar values with current employees. Employers who need people who can quickly assimilate and be productive should pay more attention to candidates who demonstrate the ability to adapt to new cultural contexts. The benefits don't fit in. When is the best way to hire a cultural loser? People who see the world differently and have different ideas and perspectives often bring creativity and innovation to the organization. But because of their outsider status, they may struggle to have their ideas recognized by their peers as legitimate. In a recent study conducted by two of us with W. Govind Manian, Christopher Potts and William Monroe, we compared the level of cultural value of employees with how much they served as a bridge between disconnected groups in the firm's internal communications network. For example, an employee may have connections with colleagues who bridge engineering and sales departments, allowing it to gain access and convey a greater variety of information and ideas. In line with previous work, we found that the cultural fit was, on average, positively positive with career success. The benefits of installation culturally were particularly great for people who served as network bridges. For example, when they cross the line between engineering and sales, they could conduct their own in the technical stem with the first and in the customer-oriented discourse with the latter. People who tried to cover borders but could not show cultural ambition are particularly punished: they have been seen as cultural outsiders and social outsiders without a clear membership in any particular social clique. However, we also identified a number of individuals who benefited from cultural losers: those who did not have networks covering disparate groups but instead had strong connections within a certain social clique. Building trusting social ties with colleagues, they were able to overcome their status as an outsider and use their identity. These results suggest that an effective hiring strategy should aim for a portfolio of both conformists and at least those who can quickly adapt to the company's changing culture and cultural inconsistencies. Cognitive diversity. Proponents of cultural diversity in the teams suggest that this leads to cognitive diversity; that is, diversity in thoughts and ideas. But the conclusions about whether cognitive diversity helps or hinders team performance are not conclusive. Part of the problem is that these studies use imperfect proxies for cognitive diversity, such as diversity of demographics, personalities, or self-esteem beliefs and values. In addition, research has rarely addressed the issues of how diversity is actually expressed in communication and interaction, which is problematic given that team members are sometimes reluctant to share their real feelings and opinions. Finally, cognitive diversity is often considered static, although we know that team dynamics often change throughout the life cycle of a project. In a new study we conducted with Stanford researchers Katarina Leakes and Melissa Valentine, we overcame these challenges by analyzing the contents of Slack's messages exchanged by team members from 117 remote software development teams. We identified instances where team members discussing similar topics used different values, perspectives, and styles, and then analyzed the impact of that diversity on performance. For example, when discussing customer requirements, different interpretations of the desired user interface appearance in some cases led to developers talking to each other and not coordinating, but in other cases leading to new creative ideas. Our results show that the consequences diversity varies depending on the stage of the project's progress. In the early stages, when a team identifies a problem, diversity reduces the chances of success in reaching a goal. In the middle stages, when the team team likely to engage with the idea, diversity increases the likelihood of team success. Diversity again becomes an obstacle by the end of the project when the team is deep in performance. Cultural diversity and organization as a whole. We've seen that there are trade-offs related to diversity in teams, but how does this affect the performance of entire organizations? Conventional wisdom is that firms must choose between a homogeneous, efficient culture and a diverse, innovative culture. A homogeneous culture increases efficiency and coordination, the theory goes, because employees agree on the norms and beliefs of leadership work, but the benefits come at the expense of fewer new ideas on how to accomplish tasks. In contrast, heterogeneous culture sacrifices the benefits of consensus in favour of healthy dissent among workers that can foster adaptation and innovation. However, the evidence to support such thinking is scant and unconvincing. In a recent study, we analyzed the language that employees used to describe the culture of their organization (e.g., our culture is collaborative, our culture is entrepreneurial and so on) in anonymous reviews of nearly 500 publicly traded companies on Glassdoor. First, we measured the level of interpersonal cultural diversity or disagreement between employees over the norms and beliefs that characterize the organization. We have found that interpersonal cultural diversity makes it difficult to coordinate employees' actions with each other and reduces the organization's performance as measured by asset returns. Then we measured the level of intrapersonal cultural diversity of organizations. People with high intrapersonal cultural diversity had employees with a lot of cultural ideas and beliefs about how to perform tasks within the company (measured as the average number of cultural topics that employees discussed in their Glassdoor reviews). For example, Netflix employees conceptualized the work culture in terms of autonomy, responsibility, collaboration, and intense internal competition. We found that organizations with greater intrapersonal cultural diversity have higher market valuations and produce more and better intellectual property through patenting, which shows that their employees' differing ideas on how to do work have led them to be more creative and innovative. Jean-Pierre Attal/Courtesy of Galerie Olivier Waltman On Art: In her Cells project, photographer Jean-Pierre Attal explores the social urban archaeology of modern office towers, revealing a repetition of the patterns and poses found inside. This suggests that organizations may be able to resolve the perceived trade-off between efficiency and encouraging different cultural ideas, while encouraging agreement among employees about the importance of a common set of organizational organizational and beliefs. Again, consider Netflix: While multicultural employees have fostered a diverse company culture and driven innovation, the culture nonetheless anchors core common beliefs, such as the importance of radical transparency and accountability, that help employees coordinate and work effectively. Consequences to Practice How can these findings inform leaders of understanding culture as a tool to improve the performance of employees, groups and the wider organization? First, managers can increase retention by hiring candidates whose core values and beliefs about a desirable workplace are well aligned with those of current employees. However, too much emphasis on cultural fit can stifle diversity and force managers to ignore prospective candidates with unique perspectives. Hiring managers should look for candidates who demonstrate cultural adaptability, as these employees can better adapt to the inevitable cultural changes that are taking place as organizations move through increasingly dynamic markets and developing workforces. Also, hiring managers should not lose sight of cultural inconsistencies. They can be sources of creativity and innovation. But to make sure they thrive within the organization, managers should consider appointing them to roles in which they are likely to develop strong ties within specific social groups. This is because losers need the trust and support of colleagues to be seen as fanciful innovators rather than outlandish outsiders. Second, leaders must remember that the expression of different points of view in groups must be managed. Cognitive diversity is essential for creating new, innovative solutions to complex problems, especially during the planning and idea phases of the project. However, expressing different points of view can quickly become a liability when the team must focus on execution and meet the looming deadlines. It is at this time that team members must come together around a common interpretation of the problem and agree on what needs to be done to resolve it. Leaders must skillfully switch back and forth, learning when and how to promote the expression of different opinions and meanings and when to create context for convergence. An important distinction is justified here. The term diversity is often used to mean differences in the demographic composition of a firm's workforce. This has been particularly true in recent years, as companies have addressed pernicious problems such as the under-representation of women and minorities in leadership positions in organizations. In our work, we use cultural diversity to refer to differences in people's beliefs and normative expectations, regardless of their demographics As we have noted before, demographic and cultural diversity is linked, but demographically demographically the group can be culturally diverse, and vice versa. Our research on cultural diversity is relevant to, but ultimately regardless of, efforts to increase gender, racial and ethnic diversity in firms. Third, leaders must develop a culture that is diverse but coherent in order to promote both innovation and efficiency. This culture consists of multicultural employees, each with different norms and beliefs about how to do the job. These diverse ideas help employees succeed in challenging tasks such as dreaming of the next innovative innovation. Managers should encourage employees to experiment with different ways of working - extensive collaboration for some tasks, such as intense competition for others. At the same time, culture must be consensual in the sense that staff agree on a common set of cultural norms, a common understanding that helps them successfully coordinate with each other. Executives can signal the importance of these rules while boarding and in everyday interaction, just as Netflix leaders do, rewarding employees for sharing their mistakes with colleagues in order to promote beliefs about the value of transparency. New management tool Many of the tools we have used in these studies are ready-made products, and there is great potential for managers to use them to help solve practical problems within organizations. For example, Stanford University PhD candidate Anjali Bhatt works with us two to demonstrate how linguistic cultural measures can be used to predict pain points of post-German integration. We are studying the merger of the three retail banks, and the analysis of emails has revealed sharp differences in the levels of cultural assimilation among individuals. However, the availability of these tools also raises important ethical issues. In our work, we maintain strict employee confidentiality, which means that neither we nor the organization are able to link any employee to any specific message used in our research. We also strongly recommend not using these tools to select, reward or punish individual staff and groups for at least four reasons: Accurate prediction of individual and team performance is significantly more complex than assessing average exposure for broad types of people and groups; culture is just one thing Many factors that affect individual and team performance in organizations; algorithmic predictions often create a false sense of confidence in managers; and, finally, the provision of any algorithm of undue weight can have unintended consequences, for example, exacerbating human prejudices that adversely affect women and members of underrepresented social groups. Groups. make assessments, but it is ultimately the responsibility of people to make informed judgments using them. Managers should be vigilant about maintaining the anonymity of metadata and should regularly audit algorithmic decisions for bias to ensure that the use of language tools will not have unintended negative consequences for the culture itself, for example by breeding distrust of employees. Despite these important ethical issues, we believe that these tools will continue to generate ideas that will enable leaders to finally manage culture as a strategic resource, and ultimately lead to more culturally diverse and inclusive groups and organizations. A version of this article appeared in the January-February issue of Harvard Business Review for January-February 2020. 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