



Culture and work styles in the BRIC countries. Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) are the fastest growing economies in the world. Companies who want to establish a presence in these countries will have to understand cultural norms and work styles and how they shape the work environment. A good work environment addresses the culture of the group and the humanity of the individual. It also acknowledges that some habitat needs are universal.

The cultural attitude toward time may also have implications for the facility.

Today's companies have a world of opportunities. The challenge lies in accessing them. Technology has made it possible for companies to expand into international markets. But doing so is complex. Companies must consider the impact of local politics and/or geopolitical issues on the business; cultural issues, e.g., how to overcome differences in attitude about cost, quality, service, and process; and the integration of local culture and work styles with corporate standards, e.g., social norms and attitudes about information sharing.

The combination of the way a company answers the questions raised by the issues above and the culture (the shared set of conventions, symbols, behaviors, beliefs, and values) of the country has implications for a company's workplace. For example, in a country that values community effort over individual effort, offices might be open (to ease the exchange of information) and uniform (to reinforce that no person is more important than another).

Whether these areas are more formal or casual may depend on other cultural aspects, including the importance of status and whether status is earned or ascribed. How color and graphic displays are used may relate to whether a culture is neutral and objective or the expression of emotion is acceptable.

The cultural attitude toward time may also have implications for the facility. If a culture feels the past is significant and relevant to the present, the artifacts and graphics will likely suggest a strong tie to history. The artifacts and graphics of an organization focused more on the future might be more provocative and technologically advanced. These are all things companies need to take into consideration for their facilities outside the organization's home country.

Of course, being a global company involves more than just having offices in multiple countries. Sam Palmisano, president, chairman, and CEO of IBM, has said, "To be truly global today, a company has to do more than set up sales offices or research facilities in multiple markets, or send its people on international assignments. You have to engage at the level of culture, as well as process." Before a company can engage at the level of culture, it must first understand the culture of the country in which it's conducting business.

Given that they are on the cusp of becoming economic contenders, Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) and the four cultures they represent (Latin, Eastern European, Indian, and Asian) are well worth understanding. These countries account for more than a quarter of the world's land area and more than 40 percent of the world's population. They have changed their political systems to embrace global capitalism¹, and, as the fastest growing economies in the world, they are on track to be wealthier than most of today's economic powers by 2050.

This paper examines several aspects of the BRIC countries' culture and economics and their influence on work styles. The goal of the narrative is to provide insights on how to engage with the people of these countries as well as on how to design effective workplaces for them.

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Brazil

Brazil's culture is a friendly, open one that easily accommodates many ethnicities. Titles and the hierarchy they reflect are important in business situations, even though work processes are often carried out laterally, rather than along a top-down continuum. Relationships are key.² Conversations can be lively and are sometimes interspersed with heated debate, disagreements, and interruption, but it's all a normal part of cultural expression.³

The Work Environment

The workplace in Brazil is changing. Modern companies are using lower height walls to promote interaction and increase everyone's access to daylight. This is true even of executive areas.

Office life, however, remains hierarchical. How comfortable employees are in communicating with their supervisors may depend on their education level⁴ as well as an employee's level of security in his position.⁵ There are certain policies that are set by the government including work hours from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. While work hours might be adjusted by mutual agreement between employee and supervisor⁶, there is still a mandated hour-long break for employees for lunch.⁷ Overtime work necessitates overtime pay. Employees must leave the secured work areas for their lunch break, and their building security badge tracks their entry and exit. This is important to the corporation given the strict labor laws; if an employee were to be dismissed and the case brought before the labor tribunal, the building entry and exit records of the former employee would be evaluated to study their actual hours worked.

Organizations are expected to provide transportation and meal vouchers⁸, and this necessitates building in staging areas for the buses that bring employees from Metro stations to office buildings as well as restaurants at larger buildings.

Brazil's largest office building, the recently constructed 1.5 million-square-foot Torre Santander in Sao Paulo, was purchased by the Banco Santander in 2007 as its headquarters. It is considered to be the most expensive real estate transaction made in Brazil to-date at a cost of US \$650 million dollars.⁹ The building has no private offices and the executives are in an open area separated from one another by glass partitions.

The leadership at the Torre Santander facility begins their day spending a few hours together at a group table, doing individual and shared work before separating to do their departmental work.¹⁰ Medical clinics are required at larger office buildings, and a full-service office tower such as Torre Santander may have additional services such as a gym, travel agency, bookstore, hair salon, laundry, movie rental, and retail bank. Largely, organizations are investing in creating a "great place to work" and also helping employees to productively fill their hour-long lunch break.

Office standardization has become more important as offices become modernized. Global organizations may develop or implement standards they have used in other

Technology use is pervasive in modern Brazilian offices.

countries. Given the cost of technology and the expense of moving cabling, emphasis is placed on creating universal workstation types to support box moves.¹¹ Individual employee spaces are getting smaller so personalization within the workplace is typically kept to a minimum. Before moving to the Torre Santander building, employees were disappointed that their personal items (which included large plants, small refrigerators, etc.) would not be welcome in the new space. The facilities team allowed employees to bring in small plants (African violet-size) which solved the employees' issue, yet kept the environment neat. They also kept employees informed of the building's quest for LEED certification, which gave employees a sense of ownership and responsibility for the building.

With 95.21 million people in the workforce¹², Brazilian corporations are concerned about the attraction and retention of employees. So much that many Brazilian corporations try to secure a position on the Great Places to Work Institute's "Best Companies to Work For" list and use it as a recruiting and retention tool as well as an expression of their positive corporate culture. The tool evaluates an organization's communication, quality of management, and personal development opportunities, among other areas. Most of the large companies in Brazil participate in the evaluation in hopes of being named to the list.¹³

Technology use is pervasive in modern Brazilian offices. Throughout the Torre Santander building there are back-to-back standing-height peninsula tables separated by low walls that have flat-panel monitors and multiple outlets for laptops. These are used for small meetings and conference calls; the panel monitors are used for viewing group work. WiFi is accessible throughout the space to facilitate work anywhere in the building. Managers carry company-paid PDAs, but soon everyone will have access to PDAs or phones with data, as costs continue to come down.¹⁴



- Open office environment: Panel-based evolving toward benching/desking
- Typical workstation size: 5' x 5' to 6' x 6'

Managers prefer to sit in private offices that have been furnished with higher quality furniture rather than sit with the general workforce.

- Typical bench size: 5' or 6' x 2.5'
- Panel screen height: 4'
- Private office for middle and senior management
- Increasing ergonomic standards

Russia

Russia has undergone significant changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union, moving from a globally isolated, centrally planned economy to a more market-based and globally integrated economy.

Unlike during the Communist rule, when the decisions were in the hands of the party, business leaders are now making their own decisions and accepting responsibility. Being too independent, however, is still considered a negative in Russia, where the community takes precedence over the individual. Historically, many Russians have practiced communal living and they know how to work and live closely together in small spaces. They value clever space-savers, such as a narrow buffet that opens up to a table large enough to seat 12 people.¹⁵

The Work Environment

Russian business is still largely hierarchical; senior management often makes important business decisions large and small without the involvement of staff. While many senior managers may not like to give up responsibility, many subordinates fear taking it. Paper trails are important, so offices have space to accommodate large quantities of paper documents and archives. Managers also expect to be able to lock things up, or “seal the door” at work.¹⁶

Managers prefer to sit in private offices that have been furnished with higher quality furniture rather than sit with the general workforce. In keeping with their hierarchical work culture, status is important to Russians. Space signifies power and authority, and many state offices tend to be extravagantly large and ornate.

First impressions and image are also important in Russia.¹⁷ “One greets (people) according to their clothes and says farewell according to their mind” states a Russian proverb. People enjoy dressing up and tend to be more formal about it. Shoes are important and workers keep a good pair of shoes in the workplace to wear after they take their boots off. Russians protect themselves from the elements by dressing in layers. Consequently, all workplaces have an area where workers can take off and hang up their outerwear and remove and store boots.¹⁸

Russians consider the workplace to be their second home, and just as they would be in their homes, they are mindful of the comfort of others. Workers feel awkward, for example, if one colleague is sitting while the other stands. In addition, tea drinking rituals are conducted in the workplace at certain times. Colleagues leave their desk area to have

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tea and chat in a designated space, e.g., a kitchen or café. Finally, many make the work environment more homey and cheerful with decorative touches and personal artifacts.

There is some technology in the office, but Russia, constrained by its lack of political and economic liberalization in the early 1990s, was late to embrace the Internet. Usage is expanding as the middle class grows and stabilizes. Technology is becoming more of a home fixture rather than for schools and work. Personal communication and e-commerce are taking precedence over research and business use. There is some indication that new laws will define "extremism" and the government will control what can be viewed on the Internet. This would be similar to the tightened controls on print and broadcast media.¹⁹



- Local companies prefer desking system solution
- Foreign companies' workplaces are driven by European work styles
- Hierarchy important
- Paper document and archival storage remain important
- Increased influence by Europe/US A&D firms

India

The old and new collide in India. The 3000-year-old caste system still exists, consisting of four traditional castes with thousands of subsets that determine one's social, historical, and economic fate. Discrimination based on caste is outlawed but caste remains significant in politics, business, and marriage. In fact, 95 percent of the population engages in arranged marriages.

Building relationships over time through conversation, hospitality, and loyalty is important in India. Friendship and kinships have been more important than expertise²⁰, but that may be changing. Material success and creativity are highly valued. Indian organizations tend to be more people-driven than process-driven.

Some Indian organizations are facing the same workplace struggles as companies in Western countries, namely workspace size and designation and worker mobility.

The Indian culture views time as moving in a circle with the past and present together with future possibilities. In office settings, this understanding of time translates into meetings that start roughly, rather than precisely, on time.

The Work Environment

According to T. Surendar writing in *Forbes India*, by international standards, the Indian workplace still has a long way to go before the workplace is completely modernized.²¹ The smaller, more traditional local Indian offices are uncomfortable, poorly designed, outdated, and not ergonomic.²² They tend to be managed from the top down.

Large, public companies, however, are a different story. With those, the parent company determines the culture of the company and newer companies in India (IT, telecom, banking) are much more flexible in their approach to management.²³

Some Indian organizations are facing the same workplace struggles as companies in Western countries, namely workspace size and designation and worker mobility. Not all work happens at a desk, not all meetings take place in meeting rooms, and knowledge workers need a greater variety of settings than those provided by traditional design solutions. They are realizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and that different types of spaces are needed for different types of workers and activities.

The typical workstation in India generally consists of a desk/work surface, a storage unit, and partitions. Lately, several organizations have cut down the personal “me” space by up to 50 percent in an effort to cut costs and boost productivity.²⁴ Other initiatives include reducing the height of cubicle partitions, opting for more open plans, and eliminating assigned workspaces altogether. In addition to cutting costs, these strategies encourage collaboration. Some companies observed that by reducing the height of the panels there was an increase in mentoring activities. Lower panel heights allow workers to have more one-on-one interaction and companies have seen an increase in productivity. Some companies are using a combination of open and closed areas. The closed areas give workers some acoustical privacy, as well as the quiet needed for thinking or reading.²⁵

Seeing an opportunity to increase productivity through increased communication, collaboration, performance and workflow, companies in India are beginning to plan space according to work patterns rather than hierarchy. Offices are becoming “flat,” transparent, and open. These changes in workspace can further change the culture. For example, instead of sitting with his peers on the luxurious directors’ floor, the chief financial officer of one of India’s largest manufacturing companies preferred to be seated with the finance department to facilitate decision-making. There is a realization that good workplace design makes an organization more effective.

As the middle class grows in India and homes become nicer, workers’ expectations of a nicer workplace are also rising. Companies are starting to think about how they can use their offices for attraction and retention. Indications are that India is about to see a wave of property innovations that will bring workplace architecture to global standards.

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Over the last decade development has been taking place in areas that were once considered undesirable. This promises to change the office landscape.

India's technology infrastructure is behind other BRIC countries and the Internet penetration of the population of the country is only 1.7 percent.²⁶ India is forging ahead, however, with software and technology development. It is one of only three countries that make its own supercomputers and it has the second largest group of software developers after the U.S.²⁷ Still, some Indian citizens have been left behind. It has been suggested that the way in which to address some of India's biggest societal challenges, including healthcare problems, the shortage of doctors, poverty and the lack of urban jobs for the uneducated, is through the inward use of low-cost technological innovations.²⁸



- Evolving toward a more open environment using a blend of panel-based systems and benching
- Typical sizes: 5' x 5' or 6' x 6' workstations and 5' to 5'4" w x 30" to 32" deep benching surfaces
- 1 storage pedestal per person
- Some private offices
- Becoming less hierarchical

China

The teachings of the scholar Confucius (551 – 479 BC) have had great influence on Chinese society. Confucius was particularly interested in the application of morality in real life. He believed that society is based on a number of (unequal) relationships: those between a ruler and his subject, a father and his son, an older brother and his younger brother, a husband and his wife, and, lastly, between friends.²⁹

Understanding the importance of extended family in China helps one understand dynamics in the traditional Chinese office.

When these relationships function as they should, there is stability and harmony within society. Those in superior positions have authority over those below them, and while their authority should not be questioned, they have the obligation to show kindness and provide protection to those who pledge their obedience and loyalty to them.

The word in Mandarin for "relationship" is *guanxi*, the networking, or linking, of two people in a relationship of mutual dependence. Each party within that relationship can expect to ask for and receive guidance, help, and favors from the other party. Reciprocity is integral to the relationship and expected.

While these relationships are helpful in the support they offer, they can also be a source of great stress. Every decision, action, and communication has to be made within the context of the relationship, which takes precedence over practically everything else. In its worst form, *guanxi* is a source of corruption and misuse of power.

The group is much more important than the individual in China. A person is part of a number of societal groups: work, family, school, community. Within each group, he or she has a number of obligations and expected behaviors. The extended family is considered the cornerstone of society. The Chinese language provides a clue to the importance of the family as there is a term to describe every single individual relationship within the entire extended family.³⁰

The Work Environment

Understanding the importance of extended family in China helps one understand dynamics in the traditional Chinese office. The Chinese work environment is like a family of sorts, with the boss being the patriarch of the company. Employees expect and respect a strong leader and want a very clear structure in the company. They need to know who is responsible for what, what their personal responsibility is and the exact hierarchical structure of the company. The boss, not the worker, is responsible and accountable for big decisions. With age comes seniority in the workplace and there is a certain level of formality within the work environment.

As with all cultures, social relations and trust are important in the workplace. Questions about age, marital status, children, and salary level are all normal and seen as a part of getting to know each other. Once they are established, relationships in China are for life. In fact, developing a friendship and trust is more important than signing the deal.³¹

The modern Chinese work environment is planned and developed around hierarchy. Only executives get private offices. The use of American-style panel systems is common in the Chinese work environment. Because real estate in the major cities is expensive, the size of the individual workstation is small—5' by 5'. A typical workstation for the average office worker consists of a main surface with a smaller return and a pedestal for storage. Lateral files are usually placed in banks alongside workstation clusters and create corridors and space delineation between departments.

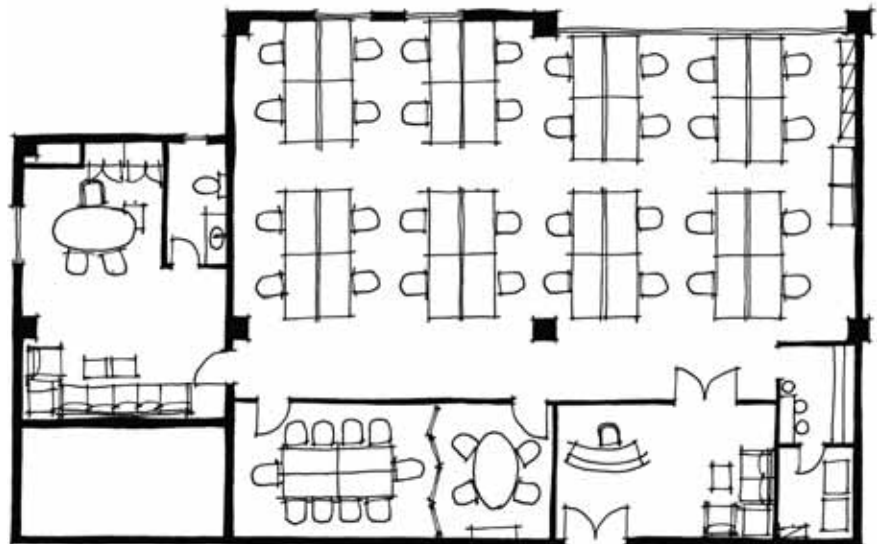
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There is little privacy. Panel heights are very low so that every one can see each other and communicate with others from a seated position. Depending on the company, supervisors and first level managers will typically get the same type of workstation as the people that report to them and will sit in immediate proximity to them. As people move up in the hierarchy they will get slightly larger personal spaces with additional privacy and storage options. Below desk privacy and modesty is very important, as many women wear skirts to work.

Many organizations have found that workers don't often use the return surface provided in a traditional cubicle-style workstation. That may be one of the reasons behind a recent trend towards benching in the office. Benching increases density, thus offering lower real estate costs. Its linear set-up also allows for easier cabling.

Feng shui, or "wind water," an ancient system developed over 300 years ago in China, is a way of balancing the energies of any space to assure the health and good fortune for people inhabiting it. While not everyone embraces it, feng shui is still used in the placement of, as well as the exterior and interior design of, buildings and office spaces. When it comes to the interior, the areas where *feng shui* principles are used most often are the reception area and the finance department.³²

Telecommunications have gone through a real revolution and phenomenal growth in China, and that, in turn, has been a big impetus for the economic development of the country. The government fully supports and encourages high-tech innovation to spur further economic growth and social development in the 21st century. Yet the government continues to tightly censor the information that is shared with the Chinese public, especially online.



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- Panel screen height: 4'

- 1 pedestal per person for storage
- Private office for senior management only

Phylogenetic Design™: Elements that Resonate with All Cultures

While focusing on the unique aspects of the BRIC countries and the differences in their cultures is useful for the purposes of doing business there, it's important to remember that we, as humans, have much in common.

Phylogenetic design recognizes the fact that we are all linked to our human evolutionary history through our genetic memory. An environment designed phylogenetically incorporates attributes of natural settings we gravitate towards. Thanks to our ancestors in the African Savannah, we experience natural landscapes in strategic territorial terms inherited from those hunter/gatherers. "Prospect territory" offers wide, distant views with light in the distance and meandering paths. "Refuge territory" refers to small, secure places that offer visual protection through tree canopies or other coverings—hideaways.

An office that incorporates these attributes of open vistas and protective spaces could very well appeal to any worker, regardless of culture. We all feel the need to see what's coming, as well as the need to escape. Furthermore, we all enjoy the diversity in nature, and nature's invitation to explore and discover. Workspaces that are diverse and invite discovery also speak to people of all cultures.

Those attributes relate to our human core. Layered over that core is the culture in which we live, and to at least some extent, the office reflects the culture. The result is that while people the world over go to an office, the office doesn't look or operate the same. Herman Miller did a study of floor plans from around the world. The research showed:

- 36 percent of the international building geometries are curvilinear or angular compared to 19 percent of the North American plans.
- 25 percent of the international space planning incorporated organic layouts, in which furniture is not arranged in rigid rows or clusters, while only 3 percent of the North American floor plans did.
- Both international (90 percent) and North American (86 percent) plans incorporated storage outside the workstation.
- The majority of offices outside of North America are traditional private office layouts, located primarily along the perimeter of the building (54 percent) and having a freestanding desk in the middle of the room and guest chairs facing the desk. Private office layouts in North America were primarily u-shaped (52 percent), with systems furniture along the wall and a return.
- 97 percent of all international floor plans used standardized workstations.
- 70 percent of community space is dedicated to conferencing.

There are many factors that impact how a global workplace is implemented: Cost-value relationships, government policy and control, technology usage, increased mobility, cost of real estate, architecture and design influences, as well as cultural realities. Some global

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organizations might make decisions about their offices based on corporate culture, brand, and standards. Other companies may allow local culture to take precedence.

World culture consists of a myriad of ways that life and business can be conducted. There are no universal answers but there are universal questions, challenges, and dilemmas. And that is where we need to start.

	Brazil	Russia	India	China
Population	196,739,269 (#5)	140,041,247 (#9)	1,156,897,766 (#2)	1,338,612,968 (#1)
Age Structure	0 - 14 yrs: 27% 15 - 64 yrs: 67% 65 yrs and over: 6%	0 - 14 yrs: 15% 15 - 64 yrs: 72% 65 yrs and over: 14%	0 - 14 yrs: 31% 15 - 64 yrs: 64% 65 yrs and over: 5%	0 - 14 yrs: 20% 15 - 64 yrs: 72% 65 yrs and over: 8%
Labor Force	Agriculture: 7%	Agriculture: 10%	Agriculture: 18%	Agriculture: 40%
Occupation	Industry: 26% Services: 68%	Industry: 32% Services: 58%	Industry: 20% Services: 62%	Industry: 27% Services: 33%
Median Population Age	Total: 29 yrs Male: 28 yrs Female: 29 yrs	Total: 38.4 yrs Male: 35 yrs Female: 42 yrs	Total: 25.3 yrs Male: 25 yrs Female: 26 yrs	Total: 34 yrs Male: 34 yrs Female: 35 yrs
GDP Purchasing Power	\$2.024 trillion (#10)	\$2.103 trillion (#9)	\$3.548 trillion (#5)	\$8.767 trillion (#3)
GDP Per Capita	\$10,200(#103)	\$15,200 (#73)	\$3,100 (#165)	\$6,500 (#127)
Primary Languages Spoken	Portuguese; also Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese, English	Russian	Hindi 41%, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Punjabi, Assamese, Maithili; English for national, political and commercial conversation	Standard Chinese or Mandarin (Putonghua, based on the Beijing dialect), Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghainese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan (Hokkien-Taiwanese), Xiang, Gan, Hakka dialects
Internet Users (2008)	65 million (#5)	45.25 million (#8)	81 million (#4)	298 million (#1)
Cell Phone Users (2008)	151 million (#5)	188 million (#4)	427.3 million (#2)	634 million (#1)

Source: CIA World Factbook. 2009 estimates unless noted, percentages rounded. World comparison (#).

Notes

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