



Inclusion in the Context of APAC Culture

Inclusion Action Toolkits

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Introduction

The Asia Pacific (APAC) region is a vibrant mosaic of diverse cultures, languages, religions and histories that profoundly shape workplace dynamics. Far from a homogeneous market, APAC's rich cultural tapestry demands DE&I approaches that respect local values and interpersonal etiquette.

With over 7,000 languages spoken and a blend of indigenous cultures alongside influences from ancient civilisations such as China, India and South East Asia, the region's unique social norms and worldviews vary widely. From Confucian principles emphasising harmony and hierarchy in East Asia to the pluralistic, community-focused traditions common in South and Southeast Asia and the millennia-old heritage of Indigenous peoples in Australia and New Zealand, APAC's cultural diversity is immense.

Religious diversity is equally remarkable, with the largest populations of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, alongside Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Daoists, Shintoists and many others. A complex tapestry of beliefs coexists and intermingles, enriching societal values, festivals and daily life across the region. APAC societies have been shaped over centuries by trade, empire, colonial histories and the complex process of nation-building. This history has fostered a collective experience of coexistence and ongoing negotiation among diverse ethnicities and faiths.

While this cultural richness is a tremendous asset, it also brings challenges for workplace inclusion. Deeply ingrained communication styles; such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy and the importance of saving face, require inclusion efforts to be thoughtfully localised, ensuring psychological safety and a genuine sense of belonging that aligns with each market's unique cultural context.

This profound cultural and religious diversity provides the foundation for effective DE&I strategies in APAC. By tailoring approaches to honour this pluralism, organisations can unlock the potential of their diverse workforce and build resilient, thriving workplaces.

This toolkit supports organisations in navigating APAC's unique cultural nuances with practical guidance, localised strategies and market-specific case studies. By understanding and adapting to local contexts, businesses can cultivate psychological safety.

Understanding APAC Cultural Nuances

The APAC region is extraordinarily diverse, not only in terms of ethnicity, language and religion but also in the underlying cultural values that shape workplace behaviour and interpersonal interactions. Understanding these common cultural themes is essential for designing effective and respectful DE&I strategies that truly resonate in local contexts.

Common Cultural Themes in APAC

Collectivism and Harmony

Many APAC cultures prioritise the group over the individual, valuing harmony, cooperation and collective success. This contrasts with Western individualism and affects how employees approach teamwork, decision-making and conflict resolution. The emphasis on social cohesion means employees may avoid overt disagreement or self-promotion, instead contributing discreetly to maintain group unity and balance.

Inclusion Strategies



Frame inclusion goals as advancing group harmony and collaboration. E.g. Gender inclusion is about progress for all



Encourage team-based recognition and celebrate collective achievements to reinforce group cohesion



Foster inclusive decision-making processes that give space for quieter voices, using small-group or one-on-one conversations to complement larger meetings.

Respect for Hierarchy and Seniority

Hierarchical structures are deeply ingrained in many APAC workplaces, influenced by Confucian values and traditional social orders. Respect for elders and those in senior positions guides communication styles and decision-making. Younger or junior employees often show deference to seniors, which can mean reluctance to openly challenge ideas or express dissent in public settings.

Inclusion Strategies



Encourage senior leaders to visibly sponsor and model inclusive behaviours, signalling that open dialogue is welcomed.



Implement mentorship programmes that connect junior employees with trusted leaders to help build confidence to speak up.



Use hierarchical structures strategically – invite input through different means such as sharing their insights via chat, a kanban board, or other methodology of ideation.

Indirect Communication and High-Context Culture

APAC cultures often prefer indirect, high-context communication, where much is conveyed through tone, context and non-verbal cues rather than explicit words. Saying “no” directly is limited; instead, employees might use subtle hints or ambiguous language to avoid confrontation or embarrassment. This requires cultural sensitivity in interpreting feedback and encouraging open dialogue in inclusive ways.

Inclusion Strategies



Develop cultural intelligence training to help employees and leaders interpret indirect messages accurately.



Provide clear, written follow-ups after meetings to clarify points and enable confirmation of understanding.



Encourage the use of neutral enquiry phrases (“Can you tell me more about...” rather than direct “no” or “disagree”).

Collective Decision-Making and Patience

Decisions are frequently made collectively rather than individually, with a preference for consensus-building over rapid unilateral actions. Patience and prolonged discussion are seen as virtues, fostering trust and thorough understanding. Talent and Leadership Strategies must account for these pacing differences to ensure engagement and sustainability.

Inclusion Strategies



Allow sufficient time for consultation and consensus-building in decision-making



Facilitate inclusive workshops with diverse representatives to co-create solutions.



Recognise that decision timelines may differ from Western norms and adapt accordingly.

Religious Pluralism and Cultural Diversity

The Asia Pacific region – apart from the relatively homogenous North Asia – stands out for its deep religious and cultural diversity. This diversity profoundly shapes workplace culture and inclusion practices. Major world religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism and indigenous beliefs coexist across countries, influencing social norms, rituals, holidays, dietary needs and attire. Additionally, Australia and New Zealand embody some of the world's most multicultural societies, reflecting a broad spectrum of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds where inclusive policies and communication must be flexible and responsive.

Inclusion Strategies



Respect and accommodate religious observances, dietary requirements and dress codes.



Provide flexible holiday policies recognising diverse festivals and religious dates.



Foster employee resource groups representing various cultural and religious communities to create spaces for dialogue and celebration.



Use diverse imagery and multilingual communications tailored to local contexts.

Language Diversity

The Asia Pacific region is extraordinarily linguistically diverse, with over 3000 languages and dialects spoken across countries. While English often serves as the common business language, this emphasis on English can sometimes unintentionally create barriers to inclusion for non-native speakers or those less proficient. Language diversity not only reflects cultural heritage but also directly impacts communication, collaboration and psychological safety at work.

Inclusion Strategies



Provide multilingual communications and resources wherever feasible to ensure accessibility.



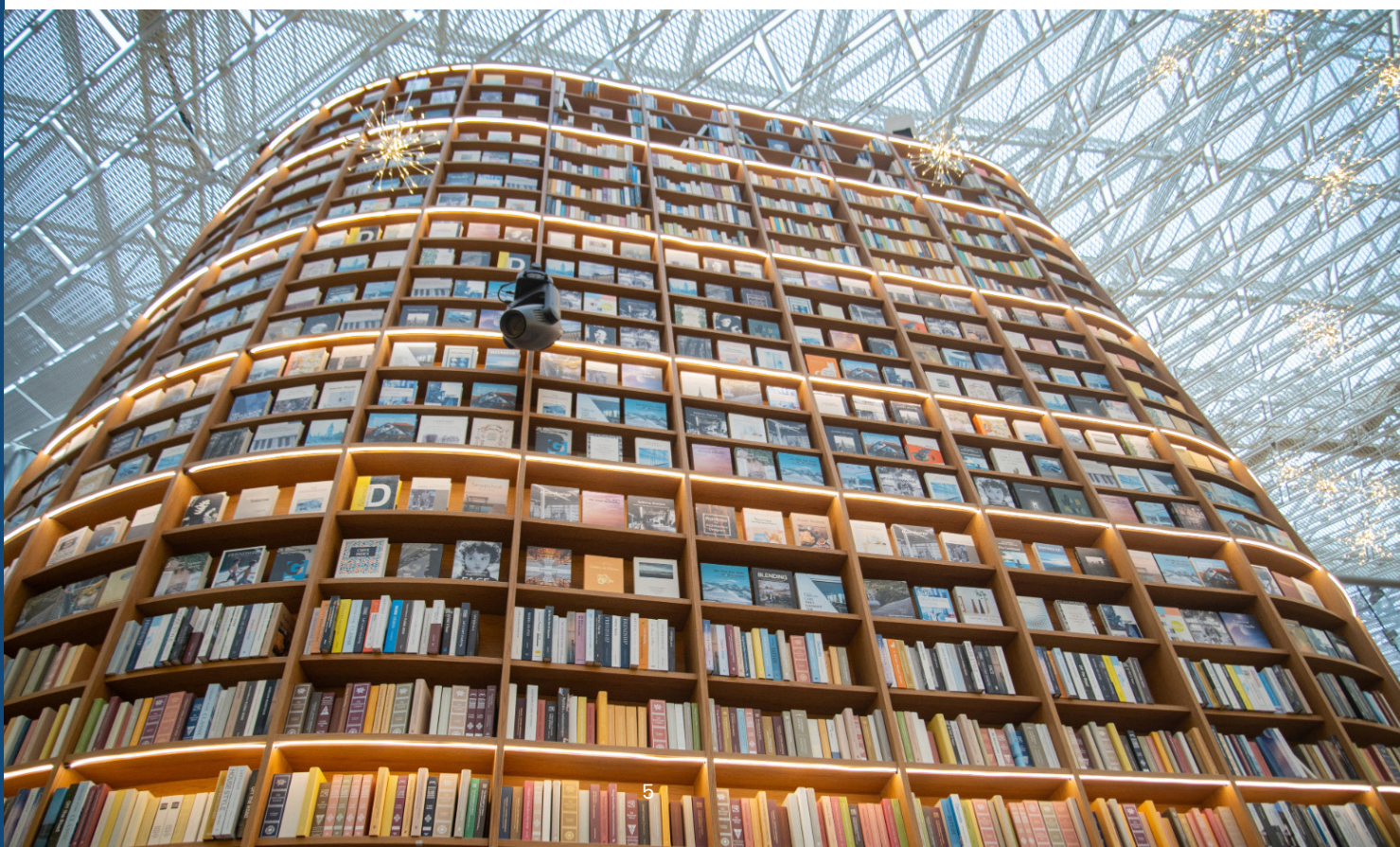
Offer language training and support programs to help employees improve language skills without making proficiency a gatekeeping criterion.



Promote awareness of linguistic diversity to reduce bias related to accents or language proficiency in evaluations and daily interactions.



Encourage use of simple, clear and culturally sensitive language in all communications.





Cultural Nuances Based on Region

As mentioned, the APAC region is vast and extraordinarily diverse, encompassing countries with distinct histories, languages, religions, ethnicities and social norms. Rather than presenting cultural nuances on a market-by-market basis, this toolkit organises insights by regional groupings – South Asia, Southeast Asia, North Asia and Australasia – to help provide a more manageable framework for understanding broad cultural patterns and commonalities. This regional approach supports organisations in developing inclusion strategies that reflect shared cultural themes, enabling adaptable frameworks that can be locally customised.

Disclaimer on Regional Generalisations

It is important to recognise that even within these regional groupings, each market maintains unique cultural traits, social dynamics and workplace practices that can differ significantly. Generalising by region inevitably obscures important local nuances and variations. Therefore, while this toolkit offers foundational guidance at a regional level, it should never substitute for deep, market-specific cultural insights and local knowledge. Tailoring inclusion efforts to specific countries and communities remains essential for authenticity and impact. We encourage organisations to use this regional overview as a starting point, then engage local stakeholders and experts to refine strategies that truly resonate at the country and community level.



Key Cultural Nuances in **South Asia**

South Asia, comprising of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, is one of the most culturally diverse and populous regions globally. It is characterised by intricate social hierarchies, a myriad of ethnic groups, religious plurality and complex intersections of tradition, modernity and economic change. This distinctive backdrop shapes workplace dynamics profoundly, requiring DE&I strategies to be deeply adapted to resonate locally and drive sustainable inclusion. In addition to the points mentioned above, here are some cultural nuances specifically to South Asia.

Caste and Ethnic Identities

Though legally outlawed in many countries, caste-based social distinctions remain influential in many workplaces, particularly in India and Nepal. These often subtly affect recruitment, promotion and peer relationships. Ethnic and linguistic identities also shape social grouping and opportunity distribution.

While caste discussions may be sensitive, addressing inequities linked to caste and ethnic identities is essential for equitable workplaces. Incorporate unconscious bias training tailored to local context and review hiring and promotion processes to mitigate systemic bias. Engage external experts or community organisations for culturally appropriate guidance.

Gender Norms and Family Expectations

Traditional gender roles remain strong, with societal expectations influencing women's career choices, mobility and leadership representation. Patriarchal norms and concerns around family responsibilities often affect retention and advancement.

Develop programmes mindful of family and societal expectations, including flexible work arrangements, leadership trainings designed for the advancement of underrepresented communities. Engage men as allies and leverage cultural narratives that support advancement for all regardless of gender.

Intersectionality and Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic background strongly influences educational and professional opportunities, interacting with caste, gender, religion and geographical origin to shape barriers and privilege.

Recognise the overlapping identities and socio-economic disparities influencing employee experiences. Use data disaggregation to identify gaps and tailor support, ensuring inclusion efforts reach those at multiple disadvantage.



Key Cultural Nuances in **Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia, comprising countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei and Timor-Leste, is a highly diverse region with vibrant cultures, religions, languages and histories. This diversity creates a unique and complex social fabric that critically shapes workplace behaviours and inclusion practices. For organisations aiming to embed inclusive culture in Southeast Asian workplaces, understanding these cultural nuances is essential to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and to develop locally resonant and effective DE&I strategies. In addition to the common themes, here are some additional nuances in Southeast Asia

Community and Extended Family Orientation

In many Southeast Asian cultures, the sense of community extends far beyond the workplace to include extended family and local social networks. Households often consist of multiple generations living together, with family members sharing caregiving and financial responsibilities. This collective approach influences workplace behaviour and decisions, as employees consider familial and community expectations alongside professional duties. Moreover, saving face in Southeast Asian countries stems not just from wanting to avoid embarrassment to oneself, but in relation to one's family and community.

Employers should recognise these extended family ties by offering flexible work arrangements that accommodate caregiving and household obligations. Fostering inclusive work environments also means creating spaces for dialogue that respect collective values and supporting mentoring networks that leverage communal bonds. Understanding the importance of extended family dynamics is essential for effective talent management and employee wellbeing in the region.

Communal Food and Dining Culture

Communal meals hold deep cultural significance in Southeast Asia, where sharing food from central dishes is a cherished tradition that fosters unity, equality and social bonding. Eating together reflects collectivist values and breaks down social barriers, promoting trust and connection among colleagues.

Incorporating communal dining into workplace events or team-building activities can reinforce belonging and celebrate cultural diversity. Inclusion strategies should also ensure respect for dietary restrictions and diverse culinary traditions as a vital part of fostering an inclusive workplace culture.

Role of Informal Networks

Informal relationships and networks hold powerful influence in many Southeast Asian workplaces, often shaping career progression, access to opportunities and social support. These networks, rooted in community, family ties and personal connections, can facilitate trust, knowledge sharing and collaboration beyond formal organisational structures. However, they may also create barriers for those outside established circles, potentially limiting diversity and inclusion if not balanced with transparent and equitable practices.

To harness the benefits while mitigating drawbacks, organisations should actively promote inclusive networking opportunities, encourage mentorship programs that connect diverse employees and ensure recruitment and promotion processes are based on merit and openness rather than solely on existing informal ties. Moreover, employee resource groups (ERGs) can also play an integral role in bringing together those with shared values and backgrounds, ultimately improving retention and development in a company. Understanding and respecting these culturally embedded networks enable companies to build more cohesive and equitable workplaces across the Southeast Asian region.



Key Cultural Nuances in **East Asia**

North Asia typically refers to countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia. This subregion shares some cultural roots but also exhibits unique social norms, values and workplace behaviours shaped by history, philosophy and modern economic development. Organisations seeking to build inclusive workplaces in North Asia need to adapt DE&I frameworks to align with these specific cultural dimensions to foster genuine belonging and engagement.

Face and Social Reputation (Mianzi / Kao / Gesicht)

The maintenance of 'face,' or personal and group dignity, is a critical social value across North Asia. Actions or speech that cause public embarrassment or loss of face are deeply avoided. This influences how feedback, criticism and conflict are managed, prioritising indirectness and subtlety.

Design feedback and inclusion discussions to occur in private or small groups, respecting individuals' desire to maintain dignity. Use indirect, strengths-based language and train leaders to be culturally sensitive communicators.

Work Ethic

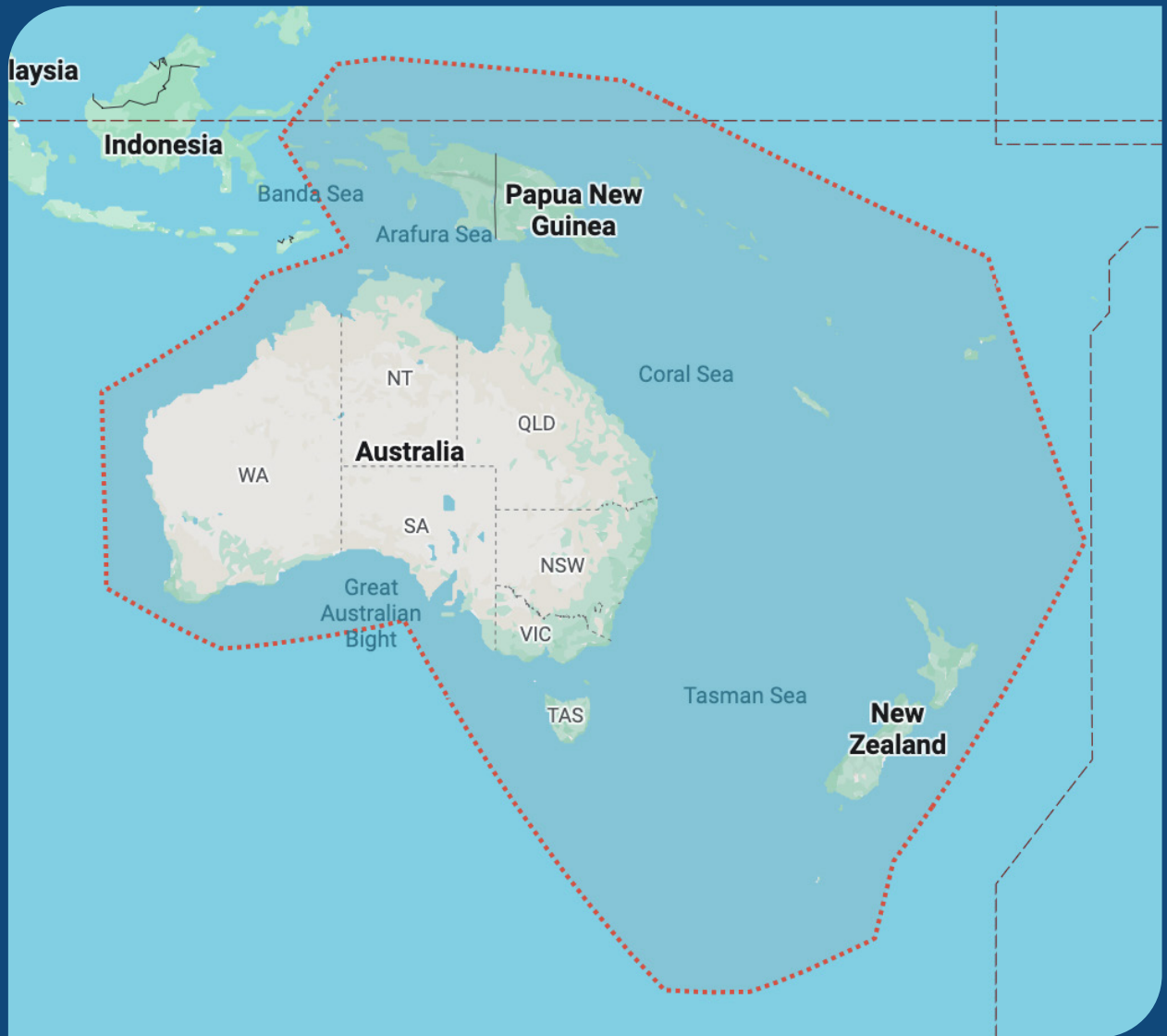
Strong work ethics combined with a sense of loyalty to supervisors, companies, or teams are common. Group cohesion is often strengthened through shared effort and collective achievement.

Establish clear organisational policies that encourage reasonable working hours, legitimate use of leave and respect for personal time. Address implicit cultural pressures to overwork by openly communicating leadership commitment to wellbeing. Support flexible working arrangements tailored to local norms, such as flexible start times or remote work options, to help employees balance professional and personal responsibilities without fear of stigma.

Importance of Ritual and Formality

Greetings, meetings and business interactions often follow formal protocols and rituals, reflecting respect for tradition and status. Politeness and careful attention to etiquette are essential in building trust and relationships.

Adapt DE&I events and recognitions to include traditional greetings, respectful gestures, or timing considerations aligned with cultural calendars and sensibilities.



Key Cultural Nuances in **Australasia**

Australia and New Zealand share a number of cultural features shaped by Western values, Indigenous heritage and increasing multiculturalism. While they exhibit relatively direct communication and egalitarian social norms, distinct cultural dynamics warrant tailored approaches to diversity, equity and inclusion that honour both Indigenous peoples and diverse migrant communities.

Egalitarianism and Direct Communication

Both countries strongly value equality and fairness, with workplaces typically encouraging open, honest and straightforward communication. Hierarchical barriers are generally lower compared to many parts of APAC and input is expected from all levels.

Encourage open dialogue with clear, direct language while maintaining respect and empathy. Create forums where all voices, including quieter or minority groups, are actively invited and heard. Provide cultural competency training to bridge generational and cultural diversity within teams.

Indigenous Cultural Recognition

Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia and Māori in New Zealand, have enduring cultural heritage, with unique worldviews emphasizing connection to land, community and spirituality. Recognition of Indigenous rights and inclusion is increasingly significant in social and workplace contexts.

Partner with Indigenous leaders and communities to co-design inclusion programmes that respect and celebrate Indigenous cultures, histories and knowledge systems. Incorporate Indigenous languages, symbols and protocols where appropriate in workplace events and communications. Finally, Support Indigenous talent development through targeted recruitment, mentorship and leadership pathways.

Informality and Relationship Building

Workplace culture tends toward informality and inclusivity, where building personal rapport and trust is valued. Laughter, openness and egalitarian humour often play a role in social cohesion.

Create opportunities for informal team gatherings that encourage relationship building across all levels, such as coffee breaks, casual lunches, or virtual social events. Promote inclusive humour and storytelling that respects diverse backgrounds and avoids stereotypes or exclusionary jokes.

Focus on Work-Life Balance and Wellbeing

There is growing emphasis on work-life balance, mental health awareness and employee wellbeing, reflecting progressive workplace values.

Embed wellbeing into DE&I initiatives, recognising the importance of mental health and work-life balance. Offer flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies to cater to diverse employee needs. Communicate organisational support for health and wellbeing openly and consistently.

Case study



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Ability Anchors is a support group at Northern Trust Philippines consisting of employees who have a disability and/or are caregivers of a family member who is a person with a disability (PWD). It was created to provide an inclusive space where employees could share personal stories and learn from shared experiences. Ability Anchors helps foster a culture of inclusive in a country where caregiving and family responsibilities are deeply rooted in cultural values. The group was launched in 2022 with six founding members and has since grown to 22, reflecting its growing importance and impact.



Motivation & Context



We wanted to build a peer support network who are in the sandwich generation, especially those caring for both aging parents and children with disabilities.

In the Philippines, caregiving is strongly tied to family values. Traditional workplace expectations can sometimes create barriers for caregivers, neurodiverse employees and employees with disabilities, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive support systems.

At Northern Trust in the Philippines, the majority of our workforce comprises women who often balance the dual responsibility of managing work-life integration and their professional commitments. A support network of this nature helps our employees share experiences and learn from one another.



Process & Approach

“ We launched storytelling sessions, built a local Ability Anchors network and featured personal stories from caregivers, neurodiverse individuals and persons with disabilities. These sessions supported our efforts towards fostering a culture of inclusion and provided a space for people to talk about their experiences in a way that felt familiar and meaningful.

Recognizing the collectivist nature of Filipino culture and the deep-rooted value placed on family caregiving, Ability Anchors provided a culturally sensitive platform for storytelling, peer support and shared learning.



Outcomes & Future Learnings

“ The initiative encouraged employees to speak more openly about caregiving and neurodiversity, helping address and alleviate stigma and build a more inclusive culture. The growth of the Ability Anchors network played a key role in normalizing these discussions through storytelling and peer support. As a result, caregiving and disability inclusion became regular topics in meetings and planning. More employees are now confidently accessing benefits such as employee assistance program, mental health consultations, flexible work arrangements and medical accommodations, reflecting increased awareness and trust in available support systems.

Being culturally aware and using storytelling as a tool can make a big difference. Empowering local champions like Ability Anchors and highlighting voices from diverse backgrounds can help build inclusion in other locations, especially in cultures where family and community are central. Other lessons include leveraging the power of storytelling to create a deeper level of emotional engagement with the employees and leveraging the power of collectivistic culture in Asia to help peers support one another.



Practical Tools & Resources

This section offers additional practical resources designed to help organisations advance their inclusion strategies by integrating and respecting local cultural contexts. These tools and guides provide actionable insights and best practices to support the creation of workplaces where diversity thrives and inclusion is deeply embedded.

Australasia

[Australia – Culture, Etiquette and Business Practices](#)

[Cultural Competence in Australia](#)

[Managing Cultural Diversity](#)

South Asia

[LSE Blog: Work Culture Dynamics: Barriers to Inclusion in India](#)

[Better Cross-Cultural Teams: A Guide to Working with Indian Professionals](#)

East Asia

[A Practical Guide for Cultivating Ethnic Inclusion in Talent Development in Hong Kong](#)

[Chinese Work Culture in 2025: What Every Leader Needs to Know](#)

[An Essential Guide to Japanese Business Culture](#)

South East Asia

[Hierarchical Communication in Southeast Asia Workplaces](#)

[10 Characteristics of Workplace Culture in Southeast Asia You Need to Know](#)

Conclusion

The Asia Pacific region's rich cultural, linguistic, religious and historical diversity provides both immense opportunities and unique challenges for organisations committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. This toolkit has highlighted how cultural nuances such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, face-saving communication and regional specificities must be thoughtfully understood and integrated into DE&I strategies.

Inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour in APAC. Rather, it requires cultural intelligence, humility and localised approaches that honour the values and social norms of each market, while fostering psychological safety and authentic belonging. Through practical guidance, real-world case studies, self-assessment tools and culturally adapted frameworks, organisations can develop inclusive workplaces that unleash the full potential of their diverse talent.

The journey toward inclusion is ongoing and evolving. By embracing the complexities and celebrating the plurality of APAC cultures, businesses can forge resilient, innovative and compassionate organisations positioned for long-term success. True inclusion in this vibrant region rests on continuous learning, committed leadership and a collective effort to build workplaces where everyone feels respected, empowered and valued.



Glossary

Collectivism

A cultural value that emphasises the group over the individual, prioritising harmony, cooperation and collective success. Common in many APAC societies.

Face / Mianzi (面子, Chinese), Kao (顔, Japanese), Gezicht

A concept denoting social respect, dignity, or reputation. Protecting “face” means avoiding embarrassment or public criticism.

Psychological Safety

The belief that one can speak up, share ideas, or admit mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation.

High-Context Communication

Communication style where much is conveyed implicitly through context, non-verbal cues and tone rather than direct words.

Hierarchy

Social or organisational structuring by rank, seniority, or authority. Highly respected in APAC cultures influenced by Confucianism.

Indigenous Peoples

Original inhabitant communities with distinct cultural heritage, such as Aboriginal Australians, Torres Strait Islanders and Māori in New Zealand.

Unconscious Bias

Implicit attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions and decisions unconsciously.

Intersectionality

The interconnected nature of social categories such as race, gender, class, which create overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Pluralism

Recognition and coexistence of diverse cultural, religious, or ethnic groups within a society or organisation.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

An individual’s capability to relate, communicate and work effectively across diverse cultures. It includes:

Cognitive CQ

Understanding cultural norms and conventions

Motivational CQ

Interest and confidence to engage across cultures

Behavioural CQ

Ability to adapt verbal and non-verbal behaviours

Appendices

Metacognitive CQ

Awareness and management of cultural interactions

Inclusive Leadership

A leadership approach that creates an environment where all individuals feel respected, valued and empowered to contribute fully. Inclusive leaders actively acknowledge cultural and social diversity, foster psychological safety and adapt behaviours to support belonging and equitable opportunities.

Localisation

Adapting policies or communications to reflect the specific social, cultural and linguistic context of a location.

Egalitarianism

A belief in human equality, particularly in social or workplace settings, common in Australasia.

Respect for Seniority

Valuing age, experience, or rank, influencing communication and decision-making styles.

Collective Decision-Making

A process where decisions are made through group consensus rather than individually.

Caste

A traditional social stratification particularly prevalent in South Asia, affecting social and professional opportunities.



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