

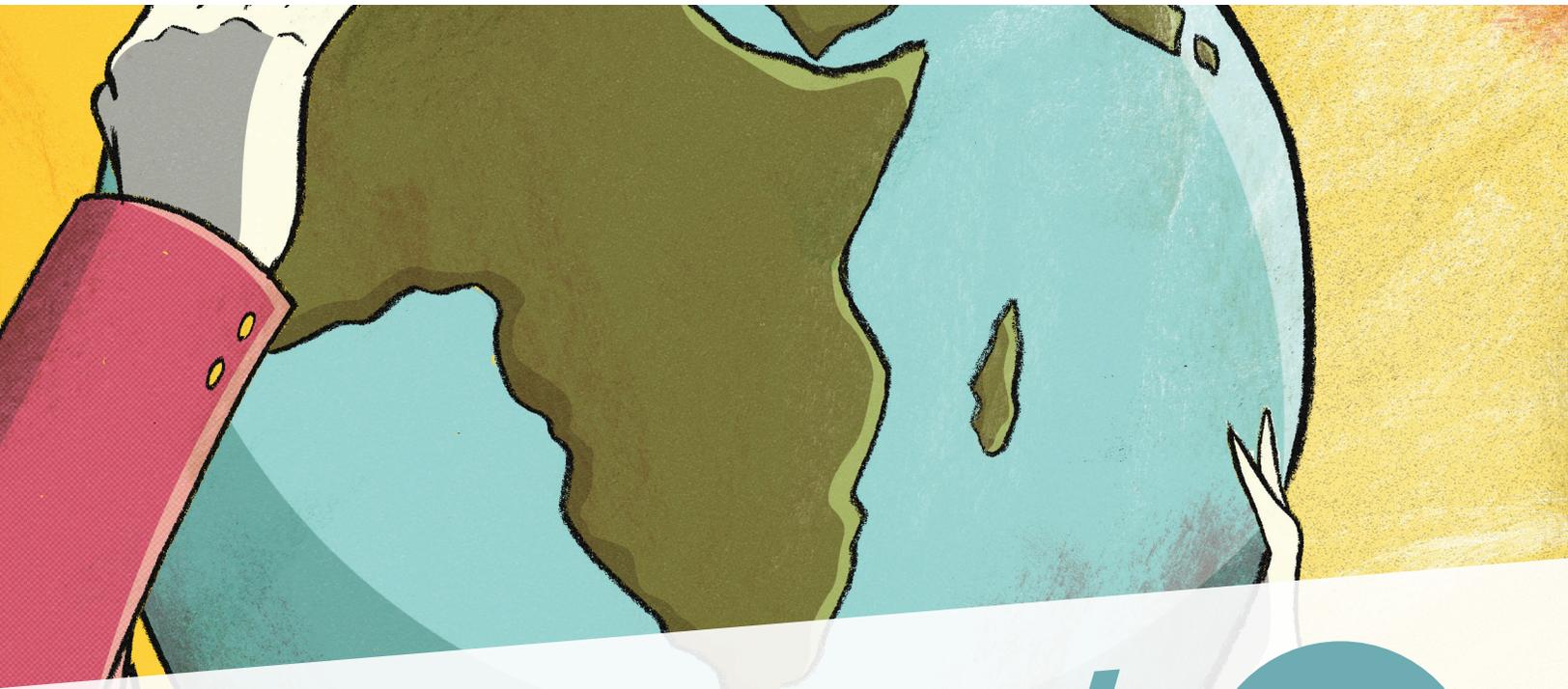
# peer to peer

the quarterly magazine of ilta

CULTURAL  
AWARENESS

SYSTEM  
INTEGRATION

PROJECT PORTFOLIO  
MANAGEMENT



## global practices/ local support

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# features

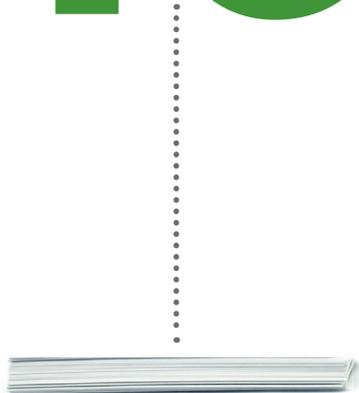


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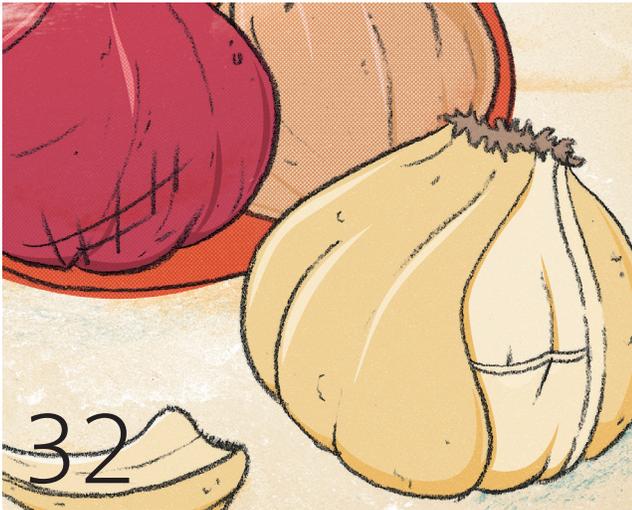
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## 32 Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity in Today's Global Environment

by Charlotte L. Washington

Interacting with multinational clients and managing multicultural legal workforces is becoming more and more prevalent. To effectively lead a global workforce, it is increasingly important to not only become more culturally aware, but to also develop cultural sensitivity. Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity will go far in improving working and client relationships as your firm expands into the global marketplace.



## 38 A Global Support Model: Fact or Fiction?

*Insight from Mayer Brown's Global Support Gurus*

Law firms are often challenged with delivering a truly global support model due to the high demand and historical culture of providing personalized service. There will be aspects of service that require both local attention and global guidance.

## 48 From Boston to Beijing: Effective Global Project Portfolio Management

by Kelly Harbour

Sound portfolio management processes allow firms to adapt resources to changing priorities without the feeling of constantly changing course. Global project portfolios that are flexible and driven by business value ensure the right technology is delivered to the right people at the right time.

## 52 A Gauntlet of Challenges: Supporting a Globalized Desktop

by David Svoboda

When your firm has international offices, you can be sure that there will be no such thing as a "standard" configuration across all offices. There are plenty of technical and nontechnical challenges you can expect when supporting a globalized desktop.

## 58 Easing the Growing Pains of Integrating New Offices

by David Wood

The IT department plays a key role when law firms take on the common but complex task of opening a new international office. There are systems integration, training and support considerations to keep in mind when aligning a new office with your global presence.

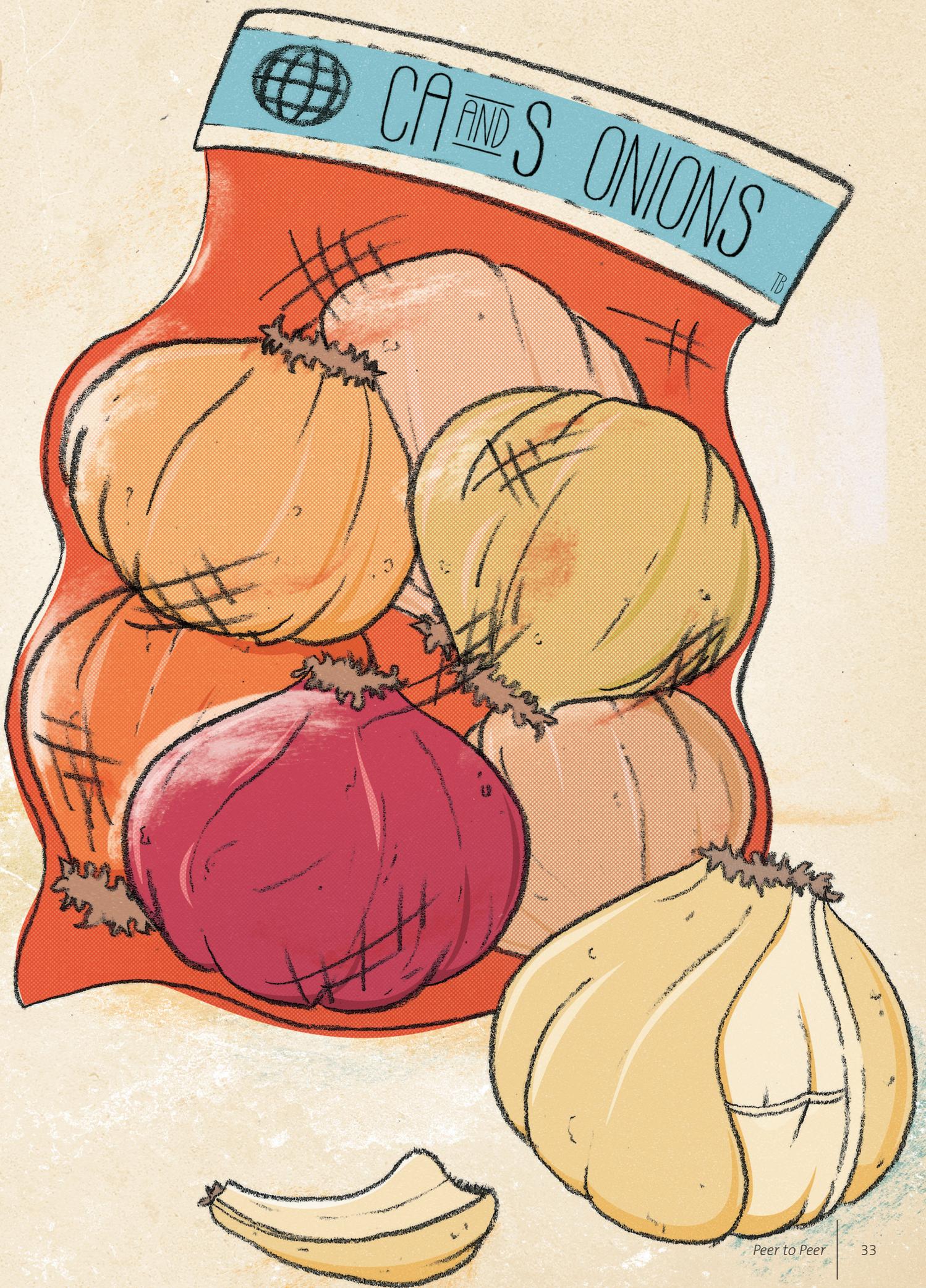
# Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity in Today's Global Environment

by Charlotte L. Washington

*As law firms open international offices and merge with firms that have a global presence, interacting with multinational clients and managing multicultural legal workforces is more and more prevalent. To effectively lead a global workforce, it is increasingly important to not only become more culturally aware, but to also develop cultural sensitivity.*

## **Connecting Culture and Relationships**

Culture encompasses the attitudes, actions, traditions, language and behavior shared by members of various groups. While these groups might be delineated in a variety of ways, two of the most common are by organization or geographic locale. As firms move toward a more global presence, failure to be aware of and sensitive to such cultural differences will be a disaster in the making. Cultural awareness is not an innate trait, nor can it be guided by a random acceptance of perceived stereotypical behavior commonly used as a basis for communication or managerial methods. To begin to understand how culture shapes an organization, which will therefore impact not only management of law firms but also client relationships, we must understand that culture is multidimensional.



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Many firms headquartered in the United States are opening offices or merging with firms in China, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, along with many other parts of the world, which brings the opportunity to serve clients from varying cultures. To foster positive relationships, it is important to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity. Conversely, it would be a devastating mistake to manage offices in other countries just like you would those within your own country. Many of us have firsthand experience in the differences encountered with East and West Coast U.S. offices, such as the laid-back California attitude and more casual attire, versus the more conservative dress and assertive style of our East Coast counterparts. It stands to reason that there will be variation of an even greater magnitude when blending offices and people around the world.

## First, Compare Cultural Forms

There have been many research studies on cultural differences that can help shed some light on this intriguing subject. As a word of caution, research studies can only offer a glimpse into the very deep concept of cultural dimension, and should merely be used directionally; they should not be taken as the authoritative guide to understanding the culture of a society as a whole.

Notably, most research studies look at a limited group within a culture, which is not representative of an entire country, organization or even a single office. Just as there are many layers to an onion, there are many layers to cultural diversity. With this understanding, the most widely recognized study of cultural differences was conducted by Geert Hofstede, a renowned comparative intercultural researcher who, over the course of several years, compiled data on employees from large, multinational companies — such as IBM — in over 70 countries. From this research, a paradigm was created known as “Hofstede’s Five Cultural Dimensions.”

The three dimensions highlighted here are more pertinent to cross-cultural business settings:

- **Individualism vs. Collectivism:** Culture in the United States has traits of a particularly individualistic society with a focus on a high degree of personal achievement. Countries such as China, on the other hand, tend to be more collectivist, where members of the culture identify themselves with a group or organization. One might ask an American what he does for a living, and the answer tends to be his specific occupation, such as “an attorney,” whereas a lawyer in China might answer, “I work for ABC firm.” Being aware of this difference can help explain why a person from a collectivist culture might find being paid a compliment about their individual accomplishment embarrassing. Rather than draw attention to personal achievements, it might be more acceptable to compliment the team.
- **Masculinity vs. Femininity:** Instead of the common perception of masculinity and femininity, this represents the tendency of a culture with a higher masculine dimension to value assertiveness, achievement and competition, such as in Japan. Countries such as Denmark and Sweden, which exhibit more feminine dimensions, lean towards caring for others and cooperation. Being aware that these differences can affect negotiation styles can be helpful, so that you won’t be taken by surprise.
- **Power Distance:** Relating to the acceptance of a hierarchical order in a culture, those whose culture exhibits high power distance will more readily recognize that power is distributed unequally. Middle Eastern cultures tend to accept that everyone has a place and generally will not seek to equalize such power. Others, such as in the United States, exhibit lower power distance, which can explain the belief that everyone is created equal. Understanding this cultural dimension can help to explain certain cultural behaviors, such as freely accepting orders or decisions from a superior, even when they create inequalities.

## Sharpen Your Sensitivity

While comparing cultural dimensions can shed some light on the behaviors associated with a culture, particularly when analyzed against those of your own country, again, it is important to understand that these are generalizations describing only the tendencies of members of the group. The key is to hone your cultural awareness and sensitivity skills.

When faced with the task of expanding into the global arena, it is beneficial to perform your own research. Simply talking with people from the country can provide amazing insight into some of the differences between the culture you are most familiar with and your new experience with another culture. Schedule some time to chat with attorneys, administrators and staff so that you can gain a more holistic perception of how the culture of the country, firm or office differs from yours.

Ask questions to gain a clear understanding about how these differences might affect your management or communication style. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Ask about the concept of time.** Do people tend to work in a linear fashion, completing one task before embarking on another; or do they tend to multitask?
- **Inquire about their purpose of work.** Is work performed to support their lifestyle? Is work merely a means to an end, or is it more for personal reward and achievement?
- **Question the nature of work relationships.** Are work relationships group-oriented or individual? Do those relationships carry on outside of the workplace?

- **Observe the general communication style.** Is there high-context communication such that both verbal and nonverbal cues convey meaning (requiring a read-between-the-lines approach), or is communication low-context and straightforward, generally conveying the entire meaning, without hidden messages?

## When in Doubt, Ask for Help

These are just a few of the areas that differ greatly across cultures, and the answers to these questions can assist you in understanding global business environments and expanding your cultural awareness. Be sensitive to the differences you might encounter, and seek guidance from your colleagues and friends who are from countries other than your own.

Avoid attempting to mirror what you see — your behavior could be seen as disingenuous or mocking. Freely admit when you need help understanding a new culture; generally you will be treated with tolerance and rewarded with insight into how the culture operates.

By understanding that culture is distinctive and dynamic, yet persists through time by being passed on from generation to generation, one can become more adept at interaction across global borders. Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity will go far in improving working and client relationships as your firm expands into the global marketplace. 



*Charlotte Washington is the Manager of Technology Services for Sheppard Mullin. She has led and participated in software upgrades and implementation projects for nearly 100 law firms and corporations. Charlotte serves as the Communications Liaison for ILTA's User Support Peer Group and is a featured speaker at ILTA conferences and regional events. She can be reached at [cwashington@sheppardmullin.com](mailto:cwashington@sheppardmullin.com).*

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