



Soft Cues to Get Ahead: 'Code-Switching' in the Workplace

Workers from underrepresented backgrounds often feel like they have to learn new pop-culture references or change their behaviors to get ahead, they say. Allies should focus on making sure that's not necessary, one recruiter says.

By David Isenberg | October 17, 2022

When **Michael Hsu**, acting comptroller of the currency, was in college, he and several of his fellow Asian friends received an email from an older alum, laying out the soft cues of what they needed to do to get ahead in finance.

"You've got to watch these shows, you've got to follow these teams, and you've got to do these activities," Hsu recalls the email saying.

"Asian to Asian, here's the secret handshake," he said of the email. "If you don't, you're going to have a hard time because you're not going to have anything to talk about with them at the bar afterward."

The influence of country club culture and sports, expensive hobbies and vacations, and elite private schools and colleges still dominate "conservative" industries like asset management, said **Stephanie Creary**, a professor of management at the **Wharton School of Business**.

This leaves workers from minority, immigrant and other diverse backgrounds at a disadvantage in getting ahead.

"The infrastructure of power and influence and how you make it ... is a narrowly defined set of people with opportunities," said **Jim Park**, chief executive of the **Association of Asian American Investment Managers**. "It's not easy to break into that; you have to acclimate into it."

Workers from diverse backgrounds often replace what they would normally prefer with something not associated with their culture through what social scientists call "covering," Creary said. For example, some Black men refuse to listen to hip-hop when they go into the office or won't say they like TV shows that center on Black experiences, "because that's not aligned with the [office's] cultural code," she said.

Workers may also "code-switch," or replace their preferences with that of the dominant majority, she said.

Many women and people of color attempting to enter industries like asset management feel they must acquire certain cultural interests, Creary added.

"Women and people of color are taught from an early age ... if you want to make it in corporate America, you have to learn to do all these things," Creary said.

Country clubs, Ivy League schools and exclusive vacation destinations “still wield significant influence in the industry that we’re in,” Park said.

But code-switching and covering can go beyond lifestyle and into the work itself.

Asian Americans often adjust their own work style to meet cultural norms of finance and elite professions, Park said. Senior leadership of Asian American and Pacific Islander descent in asset management are more likely to state that being outspoken was a key factor in their success than other Asian American and Pacific Islanders at different career levels, AAAIM research found.

And being outspoken may contradict their own cultural norms and what is expected of them by their non-Asian peers in the workplace, Park said.

“There’s this perception that Asian Americans are good with numbers, they’re great workers. ... But you’ll never put them in front of an investor,” Park added. “Because of that perception, sometimes we have an extra hurdle to jump over to get that opportunity.”

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For Asian women, these hurdles to leadership are even greater, the AAAIM survey found, with 73% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the so-called “bamboo ceiling” affects genders differently.

“I’ve been told that it would be difficult to take over management of divisions because people don’t want to work for an Asian woman,” one anonymous survey respondent told AAAIM.



In prior generations, Latinos in the U.S. felt that the best way to assimilate and advance was speak English without an accent, and therefore not learn Spanish as a first language, said **Gilbert Garcia**, managing partner of **Garcia Hamilton & Associates**. “And what a missed opportunity,” he added.

In recent years, organizations are becoming more aware that these cultural norms are problematic, Creary said. Adjusting company policies and procedures around dress codes, for example, can help address code-switching and covering. “[Such workplaces] are trying to redefine what professional means,” she added.

Such norms often have nothing to do with workplace performance, Creary said, and organizations and allies must work to convince intransigent or more conservative professionals that “there’s still ways to meet these performance-based metrics without imposing barriers for people of different cultures.”

The Black Lives Matter movement opened many industry professionals up to more conversations about diversity issues in the workplace, Hsu said. And recent violence against Asian Americans caused Asians to speak out against racism as well.

The growing importance of affinity groups has also adjusted corporate culture, he noted.

White male workers have a role to play as well, said **George Wilbanks**, founder and manager of **Wilbanks Partners**. “I would advocate that allies have a greater responsibility to code-switch in their listening skills in order to be more attuned to the possible negative micro-messaging of their

actions,” he said.

People must be intentional about their actions to make code-switching unnecessary, Hsu said.

“If you’re not actively including, then you are most likely subconsciously excluding,” he said. “Leaders have been keen to this for a lot of reasons.”

Workers should not feel like they don’t belong in the workplace simply because of their age or the color of their skin, Hsu noted.

“If people feel comfortable and confident, they will bring their best self,” he said. And this creates their best work as well, he added.

Ultimately, hard work and a good attitude go further than trying to fit in, Garcia said.

“People who have a bias are going to have a bias no matter what ... regardless of how hard someone may be trying to integrate,” Garcia said. “You’re not going to overcome that by having something to talk about.”

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