



WHAT IS THE RECIPE FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS?



There is no one-size-fits-all recipe, formula, or instruction manual for success. We find only a few shared factors between the most successful enterprises in a world Marshall McLuhan correctly predicted would turn into a global village.

Companies such as Google and Apple—so associated with virtual communication, connectivity, images, technology, computer science, and immediatism—are among the most widely-known firms for the general public. This is no surprise; they blazon their names and incalculably complex and sophisticated systems several times a second across computers and other electronic objects the world over, even in outer space.

Their employees tend to be citizens of the world, people who need no specific nationality to surrender their knowledge to particular nations or any cause ready to offer an environment laced with the right incentives for getting the most from their potential, a shepherding of talent that ingeniously holds on to workers and gives them enough freedom to accept the risks that come with being innovative. This management outlook regards the odd project failure merely as a stepping stone for a leap towards excellence, not as a reason for meting out punishment.

KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE FIRMS

These kinds of exceptional businesses are known as “knowledge-intensive firms,” or KIFs, and their value is based on the superior performance of their employees, which naturally translates into the superior performance of the enterprise. And although it may be hard to believe in this time of fierce competition, when only the most qualified, motivated, determined, and daring survive, there are many such firms that are not as well known as those that shine so big on social networks and in the mass media.

And not all of them are engaged in computer technology. Others carry out altruistic activities that generate huge profits



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Merlin Patricia Grueso Hinestroza, professor at the Universidad del Rosario, analyzes organizations that develop and exchange effective solutions, making intensive use of their employees' knowledge. They are known as knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs).

that would be the envy of any start-up established solely to fill the pockets of its owners.

KIFs are key actors in world economic growth, and represent an expanding sector of the labor market in countries around the world. For this reason, they are attracting unusual interest from researchers, especially those who study organizational culture and behavior.

KIFs: THEIR CONTRIBUTION

According to a 2016 report by the National Science Board, KIFs make a significant contribution to global growth (29% in 2014). They represent 39% of the GDP in the United States, 30% in Europe and 19-21% in emerging economies such as Brazil and China.

Several definitions of this kind of firm are found in available literature, but in general they are organizations that develop and exchange effective solutions, making intensive use of their employees' knowledge. They share certain characteristics such as highly trained personnel, the creation of market value by developing forms of knowledge that enable them to take the initiative, deploy such knowledge to foment innovation, and create skills for service provision.



HOW THEY DO IT

Their defining characteristic is not what they do, but how they do it. Their accomplishments emerge from an organizational culture based on values, beliefs, habits, myths, and symbols that are shared within the universe of each enterprise.

A KIF in Columbia awoke the interest of Merlin Patricia Grueso Hinestroza, professor at the Universidad del Rosario's School of Management and Business. This academic leads a case study on the company HarvestPlus, a joint venture involving the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), in Cali, Colombia, and the International Food Policy Research Institute, in Washington, USA.

HarvestPlus seeks to reduce malnutrition and improve food and nutritional security in Latin America and the Caribbean by increasing the consumption of biofortified crops and food



products based on them. Biofortified crops differ from the conventional varieties that are now grown and consumed in the region, having increased nutritional content and better agronomic features.

THERE ARE GOOD EXAMPLES

According to CIAT'S Wolfgang Pfeiffer "we are working to reduce the hidden deficiency of micronutrients that impacts more than 2 billion people in the world, producing crops that contain more vitamins, iron, and zinc without increasing costs to farmers."

HarvestPlus is growing exponentially around the world with the help of international nonprofit organizations such as the Gates Foundation. To Professor Grueso, it illustrates most of the characteristics of KIFs, and provides a good opportunity to evaluate them.

The results of the research show that HarvestPlus has an adhocratic culture, meaning that it is nonhierarchical, non-bureaucratic, and has evolved freely in keeping with its goals. "At its first stage (HarvestPlus Phase I), the organization was clannish, and in its current stage (HarvestPlus Phase III), the appearance of certain characteristics allows us to predict that in its next phase it will provide high-value-added products to the market that should benefit a needy population," says Professor Grueso.

LEADERSHIP VS. CREATIVITY

The research team also established that effective leadership in the enterprise stimulates creativity and risk-taking in "revolutionary ways". Trusting in employees gives them the freedom to decide what direction their work will take.

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People who work in the organization have abundant ethical values and emotional intelligence (known in these organizations as "soft skills"), and they embrace equality, diversity and interdisciplinary cooperation in order to solve problems that can multiply global impacts. There is no doubt that these elements make it possible for these enterprises to effectively confront the challenges of "hidden hunger," which is their ultimate mission.

Setting up the kind of culture to assess the results an organization needs is certainly not easy to establish. It requires a shared vision, common motivations, a flexible structure, a special management style, and many other factors too numerous to be listed as if they were a recipe for cooking up solutions to complex problems.

This is clear evidence that the most important capital for an organization continues to be its personnel, their abilities, and their opportunities for growth as human beings and professionals. These are more important than high salaries, abundant physical resources, or cutting-edge technology. ■