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# Global Pharma Companies Must Nurture 'Intercultural Intelligence'

*Insights From Jesse Sibarium, SVP, General Manager At PTC Therapeutics*

by

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) carries huge potential for business and society. However, various events around the globe, including the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighted that there are unaddressed challenges which need to be tackled. PTC Therapeutics, a global biopharmaceutical company with presence in Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) has initiated a new ED&I program to further strengthen its values and encourage positive progress globally.

[PTC Therapeutics, Inc.](#) has been operating across more than 20 EMEA countries, arguably one of the most culturally diverse regions with over 2,000 languages spoken and every world religion represented, for nearly 10 years.

Following the events of May 2020, the death of George Floyd and rise of the BLM movement, PTC management and teams in EMEA took a deeper look into equality, diversity and inclusion across the region and initiated a program to further strengthen its values in this unique landscape. But how does a globally expanding company bring such a melting pot of people together, ensuring true inclusivity? The teams engaged with the workforce for their input and, through

## About the Author

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[PTC Therapeutics](#) is a global

this, a number of interesting insights and questions emerged:

- Everyone's definition of diversity is different, and this can also be heavily shaped by where you live.
- Employee resource groups that cater to a specific community of people – be it based on sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion are important, but how do we bring a broader diversity of people together?
- Sensitivity to other cultures is crucial to reap the many benefits of a culturally diverse, international workforce.

biopharmaceutical company focused on the discovery, development and commercialization of medicines that provide benefits to patients with rare disorders.

These were the considerations that helped shape the MAGIC (Multicultural Alliance Group of Inclusive Communities) employee resource group in March 2022. Its primary goal is to connect *all* PTC employees in EMEA around a topic relatable to everyone, to nurture respect and understanding of the diverse workforce. To do this, MAGIC established and launched an 'Intercultural Intelligence' program.

## Intercultural Intelligence

As a form of emotional intelligence, intercultural intelligence is a growing focus for multinational companies as they set more ambitious goals for diversity. In short, it means respecting and understanding cultural differences and incorporating this into how you work – at every level and in every part of the business.

Intercultural intelligence is grounded in the *8 Scales of Cultural Difference*, developed by author Erin Meyer. For example, cultures established in countries with less reliable transport are more likely to be flexible with their scheduling, as they have had to accommodate this over time. Similarly, people from a confrontation avoidant society may view a direct "I disagree" as a personal attack. This is easily remedied by instead asking "Please could you elaborate on why you feel that way?"

### ***The 8 Scales of Cultural Difference, by Erin Meyer***

- Communicating: Explicit vs. Implicit
- Evaluating: Direct feedback vs. Indirect feedback
- Persuading: Principles-first vs. Applications-first

These are small nuances that make a big difference in helping all employees feel valued and

establishing harmony, especially in a geographic area where there is a heightened risk of cultural misunderstanding.

PTC Therapeutics has always had a strong culture of collaboration. The rollout of an Intercultural Intelligence program in 2020 in partnership with a specialist provider was a way to further build on this. Regular interactive webinars allow, for example, a logistics manager in Russia to talk to a marketing assistant in France about how cultural programming can affect the way they interact. The program also incorporates continuous learning and awareness opportunities through monthly 'knowledge bites' including tips, quotes and recommendations for podcasts and further reading.

- Leading: Egalitarian vs. Hierarchical
- Deciding: Communal vs. Top-down
- Trusting: Task-oriented vs. Relationship-oriented
- Disagreeing: Confrontational vs. Confrontation avoidant
- Scheduling: Structured vs. Flexible

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## Benefits Of Intercultural Intelligence For Global Companies

The rise of remote working has broken down geographical divides as we spend more time virtually with colleagues across the globe. And this is not expected to stop anytime soon. Intercultural intelligence allows us to engage more with colleagues from all over the world and profit from the full benefits of their experience and expertise.

It is no secret that a mix of perspectives is a catalyst for creativity, and intercultural intelligence allows us to take advantage of this by ensuring everyone's potential is realized. This is achieved through small adjustments to ensure inclusive communication and behavior. For example, by avoiding jargon when speaking to non-native speakers and actively inviting colleagues' point of view in meetings.

Maximizing inclusion also means that employees feel valued, which in turn promotes well-being and productivity. This is important for employee retention, as recent research from McKinsey demonstrated that a lack of 'sense of belonging' was an important cause of employees leaving their job.

Beyond creating a positive working environment, cultural sensitivity translates into a stronger representation of a diverse customer base and supports the smooth expansion into new markets. When considering pharma companies operating in EMEA, it is undeniable that there is an

inherent slant towards the big five European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK) but health care affects *everyone, everywhere*. We want to include perspectives of all markets, so that underserved patient communities everywhere can have access to treatment as needed.

Intercultural intelligence helps pharma companies to include as many points of view as possible and truly understand the cultural context for patients, physicians and other stakeholders in every country they operate. This is crucial throughout the product lifecycle, from maximizing research partnerships, to understanding the needs of patients in clinical trials and assisting reimbursement discussions. Such interactions require an understanding of local attitudes to health care and patient access, both of which are directly influenced by culture.

### **Measuring Success**

To continue to be ever better in our global ED&I approach, it is crucial to continually evaluate progress. This will ensure we stay on the most effective path and it is the next step for PTC's MAGIC ERG.

Notably, high engagement from employees and positive feedback on the Intercultural Intelligence program demonstrated the need to continue and evolve as we grow. Listening and learning from colleagues from a variety of backgrounds is an important way to achieve this.

As global pharma companies like PTC realign their focus on DE&I initiatives, it will be exciting to see the benefits not only to employees but to patients as a result of improved cultural sensitivity.