



**Kaushik Mitra,**  
Senior VP and CFO  
Suntory PepsiCo JV, Vietnam

## The Employee Manual for Succeeding in Multinational Companies

**H**aving worked in American MNCs for the past twenty years, I can now say with confidence that I have learnt not only to survive, but also to thrive within an MNC corporate culture. Two decades ago, as a young entrant into the hallowed Portals of the MNC, things were not easy for me. The 'perform or perish' culture was debilitating, the impossible timelines demanded the highest level of multitasking skills, and work-life balance seemed like a thing of the past. Yet, I survived, and learned to cope with the turbid ebb and flow of chaotic energy. Survival in a MNC in India is a course by itself. This is my attempt to share some learnings of what it takes to survive, even thrive, in such settings.

### Lesson 1: Delivering Results

Back in 1997, when I moved from an Indian conglomerate to GE, the first thing that hit me in the face was the sheer pace of the organisation. It was like going from Kolkata to Mumbai: everything just happened at a much greater speed. Sometime later, a few days after I had moved to PepsiCo, the MD called me and my boss, the CFO, for a Saturday meeting. Since Saturday was not a normal working day, I expected it to be a meet-and-greet sort of affair. I couldn't have been more wrong: it turned out to be a short briefing to tell me that I had less than a week to turn around an operating-review deck for the Executive Committee. There could have been no better introduction for me to the maniacal 'performance orientation' of the multinational company.

This 'performance orientation' manifests itself in many ways, and it can be very daunting for new entrants. People are judged all the time on the quality and speed of their delivery. Then there is the evaluation process. Normally, MNCs have an annual performance evaluation process that starts with setting the objectives for performance at the beginning of the year, moves to a mid-year review with the manager, and then to a year-end assessment that decides increments and bonuses. On top of this, there is the challenge of meeting multiple, often conflicting deadlines with limited time and resources. Multitasking is a must-have skill for surviving in an MNC environment. Looking at it positively, there is never a dull moment. The pay-off is also handsome in terms of self-development and confidence, apart from the fast-track career opportunities that MNCs offer. I have benefited immensely from the ruthless focus on results – as opposed to effort. The FISO (Fit In or Shape Out) culture has, overall, made me a better leader over the years. So, if you are results-driven and not daunted by the performance challenge, you will find the MNC culture to be a fulfilling work environment and a great career-enabler.

### Lesson 2: Living the Values

This is an endearing part of the MNC environment that I have grown to like immensely. Most, in fact almost all MNCs, have a clear set of values

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and work ethics. Each employee or associate of the organisation is expected to live these values in letter and spirit while conducting company business. Some examples of such values include: speaking with truth and candour; respect in the workplace; integrity and transparency; diversity and inclusion; and environmental sustainability. There is normally also a clearly articulated Code of Conduct, which is really the 'Bible' for expected employee behaviour.

In a sense, MNCs live the Infosys motto: 'Powered by Intellect, Driven by Values.' All employees, starting from the CEO to the junior-most individual, are subject to a common set of values. No one is above the law. There is an overarching focus in doing business the right way, and not necessarily the most convenient way. The Compliance and ethics requirement for Corporations listed in the US or in Europe are also very high, with stringent statutes such as the FCPA requiring a 100 per cent compliance with it clauses.

Personally, I find this culture refreshing and supportive of the way I want to live life: the right way!

### **Lesson 3: A Premium on Communication**

Savvy communication is an important success factor in MNCs. Much time and energy gets spent ensuring that communication is in the most appropriate form, whether it is a PowerPoint presentation or an email. There are several aspects to this. With presentations, the key is to deliver the message in a simple but convincing manner. Here, the effectiveness of the communication lies in its quality and not quantity. Often, there is a strong penchant to write long decks – based on the fallacy that it demonstrates that much work and thought has gone behind it. However, the most effective decks are short, succinct and tells a story tailored to the audience. Overall, the best communication is audience-in rather than presenter-out.

The email culture in MNCs is overwhelming and there is a strong urge to copy everyone on everything. Here again, the key is to keep the messages short and fact-based, setting out the objective of the message and the desired results. One should refrain from the urge to CC either seniors or others who have no direct linkage to either the objective or the desired result of the email. There are several instances of colleagues writing emails with BCC, which does not auger well for transparency.

In terms of oral communication, the two key prerequisites are confidence and preparation – and in my experience, one leads to the other. Simply put, the better prepared you are, the more confident you become. There are always butterflies in the stomach before getting in front of an audience, but everything settles down if you have prepped well. The other elements of delivering effective presentations are simplicity, and being fact-based. Many people get the urge to use heavy or technical language, or to share opinions that are not supported by data. None of this goes down well with the audience. The real test is not the presenter's grasp of the 'Queen's English', but how much the audience has understood the objective, content and desired result of the communication. The 'elevator speech' is in fact the Litmus Test of good communication: If you can't summarise what you want to say in less than ten minutes, then you are in trouble.

### **Lesson 4: Balancing the Balcony and the Dance Floor**

Typical roles in MNCs straddle operating responsibilities in the business units and staff roles in the regional or corporate headquarters. What is key being the ability to dive into the details when needed, and equally,

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to be able to step back and look at the big picture. This is true in most companies, but in MNCs, there is a stronger impetus to balance the short-term and the longer-term. What this means is that one needs to be comfortable with both high-level strategy and the nuts and bolts of execution. Normally, people have an affinity and bias towards one or the other, but the trick is to recognise this bias and work towards being more comfortable with the other.

Over the years, I have come to realise that I like the strategy and creative work more. Yet most of my work life has been spent in operational finance roles, and over time, I have honed the 'operator' skill and mind-set. What is important, therefore, is to try and build experience in both operating and staff roles, which helps improve the individual's ability to balance the 'thinking' with the 'doing' – or, in other words, the 'balcony' with the 'dance Floor'.

I am in no way implying here that these are water-tight compartments – in fact, any role will have elements of both strategy and execution. Let's take a CFO role in a typical brand-innovation-make-deliver-and-sell organisation. At an operating level, the CFO would be tasked with preparing and helping deliver an annual operating plan. At the same time, he or she needs to look at initiatives/opportunities for future growth, both organic and inorganic, and how to fund those opportunities, applying a future-back lens on initiatives such as transaction processing shared services and automation. Ultimately at a head-of-function level, one is expected to seamlessly straddle both the operating deliverables and the strategic content of the role. Very few of us have this balance when we start our careers. Yet over the years, I have seen professionals who are self-aware of their bias make a concerted effort to balance the two dimensions, and thus do well over a longer period.

## **Lesson 5: Networking and Organisation Savvy**

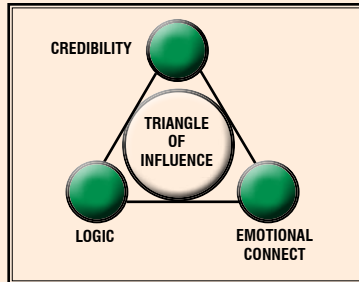
This is a unique aspect of most MNCs – many of which have global operations, a matrix structure, and operate at multiple levels, including corporate, regional and business units. Matrix structures mean multiple reporting lines, cross-functional decision-making, and several layers of communication and alignments. Navigating through this three-dimensional maze can be daunting, but those who do so successfully get decisions faster and can execute better. Others struggle, get frustrated and sometimes give up. So, what does it take to help navigate the 'Maze'? It is the ability to build formal and informal networks within the organisation.

Everyone has a normal network of connections based on his or her work area. A Finance Manager in a business unit, for instance, will have a work relationship with most of his or her functional and some cross-functional colleagues. That, then, becomes one's immediate 'network'. However, what makes all the difference is how one builds a network beyond this immediate grid. Much like a 'LinkedIn' within the organisation, the more people you are connected to, the better is your chance of getting things done faster and smoother. That, in turn, leads to success and career advancement.

I personally do not have a natural flair for networking, but would urge those who are like me to get out of their comfort zones and make a conscious effort to connect with people related and unrelated to their own grid in the matrix. One simple way to do this is to take advantage of travel. While on a development programme, connect with people from other markets or businesses and stay in touch with them. There are rich learnings to be had, and as individuals in your wider network grow in their careers, the pay-off from these relationships increase manifold.

## Lesson 6: Leading by Influence

Another aspect that separates MNCs from other companies is the open 'boss is not always right' culture. This means that all employees have a chance to participate in the 'thinking' and 'doing', and in challenging the status quo. This is different from traditional owner-driven Indian or Japanese companies, where there is a clear hierarchy and chain of command. To do well in this egalitarian corporate environment, one needs to be able to influence others. Below, I present a framework for the influencing process:



Credibility is 'who you are' and 'what you stand for'. Being genuine, possessing knowledge and 'putting team before self' helps build credibility. Logic is using data and reason to support your arguments. This helps, because most decisions in MNCs are objective, not subjective. Emotional connect is the most endearing of the 'influence drivers', and relates to how well we are tuned in to the emotions of people we interact with. Strong emotional connect helps build trust and eases the influencing process. In MNCs, one typically uses a combination of Credibility and Logic to influence upwards (one's bosses) and sideways (one's peers), while all three aspects are important in influencing downwards (one's team).

### Managing the 'softer side' of the MNC world

In addition to the points listed above, there are several 'softer' elements to coping with the MNC world. Working with such companies, particularly in India, often puts huge demands on employees. Timings are stretched, work-life separators get blurred, and the 'week' and 'weekend' become a never-ending continuum. Over the years, I have found that several factors help me cope with all of this:

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- **Taking a break after ten hours at a stretch.** I have realised that working beyond 7 pm is often not productive, and time spent with the family over dinner is a much better use of one's evening-time. It's also a huge re-charge. The law of diminishing returns applies after ten hours, and you are better off starting afresh the next day, or in an exigency, post-dinner from home.

A long stint at an MNC is like a 'corporate marathon'. You must pace yourself, or you run the risk of burning out fast. Taking short but regular breaks to get away from it all and re-charge greatly improves corporate longevity.

- **It's A for Adaptability in the MNC world.** MNCs are in constant throes of change, driven by internal restructuring or external market factors. One must accept this continuum of change as normal, learn to let go of past baggage, and embrace the new. Corporations want employees who embrace change and move ahead, not those who feel they are victims of change – and therefore resist it. Learn to think like an opportunist, not a victim.

- Finally, **one needs to have a supportive personal eco-system** in the form of family members, friends and other well-wishers. It is demanding at work, and the eco-system provides the emotional fuel necessary to keep going.

### Wrapping up...

The world of the multinational corporation promises a thrilling ride to those equipped with the right combination of attitude and aptitude. To do well, one needs to be results-driven, but with a strong values orientation. Communication and the ability to balance strategy and execution are important elements in the success mix. Proactive networking is what separates great MNC professionals from good ones. To go the distance, one needs to maintain a healthy work-life balance, leverage change as an opportunity and have a strong, supportive personal eco-system. ■

