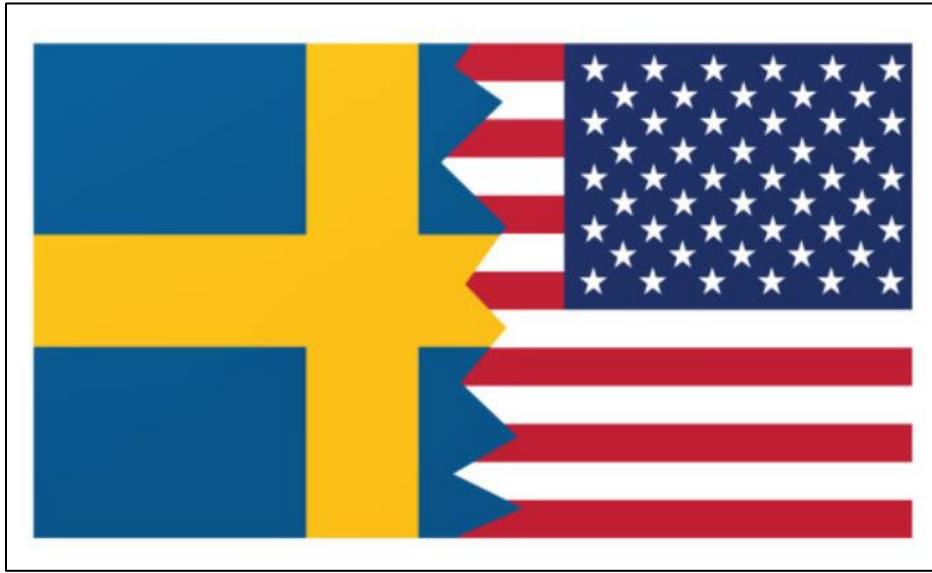


Bridging Cultural Differences: How Swedish Immigrants Adjust to the American Workplace



(Photo credit: Teepublic.com)

Since its beginning, America has been seen as the land of opportunity. Every year, millions of immigrants leave the familiar shores of their home countries to partake in the American Dream. Immigrants hail from every corner of the globe, including smaller prosperous nations from Europe, such as Sweden.

According to Dr. Dag Blanck, Director of the Swenson Center, the number of immigrants from Sweden in 2000 was around 50,000. Sweden is one of the largest investors per capita in the United States. The close trade-ties between the two nations opens the door for interaction between both cultures. Every year, many Swedish citizens choose to work in the United States on a temporary or permanent basis.

Although Swedes and Americans share a common drive for innovation, progress and cutting-edge technology, there are a host of differences in the working and management styles, rooted in the cultural practices, mindsets and values, which Swedes often find hard to navigate when they move to the U.S.

Like other Scandinavian countries, Sweden is a social democracy where there is a large emphasis on work-life balance and maintaining an equal society. This influences Swedish employers to grant longer vacation time and maternity leave, and offer high job security to workers. Compared to the U.S., Swedish organizations have flat hierarchies, and executives tend to take on a more coach-like role.

Swedish employees moving to work in the U.S, who are used to Swedish work benefits and the management style, have to adapt and change their expectations when they transition to work in the United States. They have to navigate these differences and meet the requirements of the role so that productivity is not compromised and miscommunication is minimized.

Some Swedish workers face challenges even before stepping into a U.S. work setting—when they have to present themselves as competent candidates in the job market.

Linda Karademir, who spent the first part of her career in the Swedish non-profit organization sector, struggled to find work when she moved to Los Angeles three and a half years ago. “I had to start from

zero because U.S companies didn't recognize my experience in Swedish companies, and I couldn't sell myself even though I was qualified," Karademir said.

"Swedish employers put more emphasis on your qualifications and skills rather than your ability to talk and market yourself," she said. "It took me while to learn how to brand myself and speak about my qualification and strengths with confidence to American recruiters."

"I also learned how important it is to mingle and network when searching for job," she said. After a few months of searching, Karademir eventually found a job at Facebook as a technical sourcer.

The idea of selling oneself has become a necessity in a masculine culture such as the U.S., based on a [country comparison report](#) by Hofstede Insights. With a high score of 62 on the masculinity scale, the U.S. society is driven by competition, achievement and success. Sweden with a low score of 5, has a feminine culture, where quality of life supersedes the drive for success and winning.

Cross cultural expert and communications consultant, Pellegrino Riccardi, who is currently based in Oslo, Norway, said that work-life balance is an integral component in the Nordic work culture. "They will work their nine to five and then go home—then it's kids, family and activities," Riccardi said.

Riccardi refers to the Scandinavian work ethic as "flex security", where employees deliver what they're supposed to in a timely way, under the condition they are allowed to have flexibility in their life. "The typical Nordic employee will say 'sure, I work hard and get things done, but I also have a private life that is sacred. I'm not on call 24-7 and when I'm on holiday or a long weekend, you leave me alone.'"

Riccardi said that Scandinavians working in the U.S. may find it difficult to work longer hours and deal with the heavy pressures. "It's just a lot more intense in the U.S. – work comes first, leisure second," he said. "American companies that recruit people from those countries should be sensitive to this difference, and give newly recruited Scandinavian's enough time to adjust to their demands."



Famous Swedish multi-national companies with offices in the U.S. (Photo credit: Invest in Sweden Agency)

Many Swedish companies such as H&M, Spotify, Volvo, IKEA and Electrolux, have opened offices across the U.S., creating 360,000 jobs in the process. Skanska, a Swedish multinational construction and development company, where the majority of worker in the U.S. offices are Americans and the rest Swedish, follows a distinctly Scandinavian work ethos, according to Ellen Mair, the Director of Business Development in the Skanska office in Los Angeles.

As an American who's been working in the company's construction division for over 10 years, she's noticed the high focus on certain values and protocols while working in Skanska. "It's very organized and has clear governance and specific process. It's not as loosey-goosey as a lot of American companies are," Mair said.

Karademir also noticed the less structured work environment since she started working in the U.S. "No matter what type of meeting we had in Sweden, it was planned carefully and there was an agenda, and that's not always the case out here where meetings are often informal and spontaneous," she said.

"We're also very punctual in Sweden – if it's eight o'clock, it's eight o'clock – not 8:10 or 8:15. I've noticed that in the U.S., it's more acceptable to stroll in a few minutes late to a meeting."

Mair said that Swedish companies such as Skanska are highly value-driven. "There's a significant focus on living out the company values every day, which include transparency, high ethics, safety and sustainability – all very Swedish values," she said.

Another important Swedish value is equal rights in the workplace. The Hofstede report attributes this to the countries low power distance score. Societies that score low on the power distance score, have a high preference for a non-hierarchical and decentralized work environment with a management that coaches and facilitates workers, on a need-to basis.

Silje Urke Deurlein, the Director at the Nordic Desk at YER, an international recruitment agency with offices in the United States and The Netherlands, said that this flat structure is evident in the low gap between the income of Scandinavian CEO's and the average worker in the region.

"In the U.S., a CEO's salary is 354 times more than regular employees, whereas in Sweden the ratio between the salaries is 89 to one," Deurlein said.

"It's okay to make significantly more money than others in America, but in Scandinavia you're taxed, and everything in the system is set up to create an equal playing field," she said.

"This has influenced the Scandinavian leaders non-authoritative and democratic management style. They take on the role of a peer and they prefer to give employees more freedom– they don't micro-manage."

Riccardi said that because top management are easily accessible to employees in Scandinavia, communication in organizations tends to be direct and participative. "Your typical Scandinavian will have an opinion and won't be afraid to say it their higher-ups. But that would be a mistake in the U.S. work environment where when your manager makes a decision, you just get on with it," he said.

The advantage of the American decision-making style, Riccardi points out, is that things get done a lot faster compared to Scandinavia, where decisions take longer because they consider input from

everyone in the company. “You get little resistance on the way in the U.S. You don’t have to constantly realign and reassess,” he said.

Britta Erickson, CEO at Euro VAT Refund, Inc., a VAT value added tax consulting firm for Americans that work in EU located in Culver City, Ca., said that she appreciates the quick-decision making process in the U.S. “Before I moved to the U.S., I remember having to sit in meetings all day in Sweden,” Erickson said. “Nothing gets done that way – when you have to wait until everyone’s on board.”

Erickson said that when she moved to the U.S., over 30 years ago, she had a positive experience during her transition into the new workforce. “I loved having to work with a diverse range of people. I got to celebrate Jewish holidays with my co-workers which I never did in Sweden,” she said. “There so many different cultures out here and I learned that the Swedish way is not the only way to be.”

While working in the furniture business, Erickson had to work with a lot of people from the LGBTQ community. “I had never met a gay person in my life until that time. When I worked with them, I realized how absolutely wonderful they are,” she said. “It taught me acceptance and that we are all the same – I continue to appreciate the diversity in the U.S. workplace.”

According to Erickson, opening her own business in the U.S., after leaving her job, was made easier because of the generosity and enterprising attitude of the contacts she had made. “People were so supportive and complementary. They recommended me to others if they liked my service. I found that they would go out of their way to connect me with the right people,” she said.

Forging lucrative connections is an integral aspect of the sales-driven mindset that predominates American work culture. Deurerlien said that this outlook on rewarding personal achievements has made performance-based pay commission much more common in the U.S. compared to Scandinavia.

“Americans expect rewards for their individual contribution while Scandinavians believe that everyone should get rewarded a little bit because the company did well,” she said. “But Scandinavians don’t understand that Americans need this extra money because the U.S. does not provide a safety net that a welfare state like their country provides.”

Karademir said that even though she gets paid more working in an American company, she has higher expenses because of the absence of the benefits that Sweden’s social welfare system offers, such as free healthcare and schooling. “I had to change my mindset. Even though I was earning all this money, I had to think about all the big expenses such as school fees for my children and my retirement,” she said.

“In Sweden, you know that if you get laid off and don’t get a monthly paycheck, you’re going to be okay because the government will take care of you until you find a new job. We don’t have that kind of security out here in the U.S. You have to be watchful of what you spend,” Karademir said.

Mair said that even though Skanska is a Swedish firm, the U.S. offices have to follow the local rules and regulations when it comes to salaries and vacation time. “We don’t get the free healthcare and we don’t get the month off in July like the Swedes do,” she said “In the summer, Sweden basically shuts down in July, but we continue to operate even though we don’t communicate with corporate for that month.”

Scandinavian countries also offer one most generous parental leave systems in the world. Swedish mothers and fathers are given 480 days, about 69 weeks, of leave per child, whereas in the U.S. the average maternity and paternity leave is 10-12 weeks.

“The mentality is that creating good family bonds will result in a happy and productive worker,” Riccardi said. “A Scandinavian manager doesn’t think there’s any point in bringing back a mother whose body is just not ready yet. It does the company more harm when they re-integrate a substandard employee.”

Despite all the benefits that Scandinavian companies offer its employees, Erickson said that we should be cautious about idealizing the Scandinavian approach to doing business.

“One country is not better than the other – they are just different and each one has its own pros and cons,” she said. “I believe that America and Sweden are both great countries in their own right.”

“But If could create the perfect society, it would have the Swedish vacation and maternity leave, American salaries and pensions, and California weather.”