

# Creative Workplace

## The Challenges and Gaps in a Creative Workplace Culture: U.S. and Korea

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*I am drawn to Korean facing business issues and trends. I ponder, research and then provide commentary on the direction of Korean business both domestically within Korea as well as with international operations.*

An example of this process resulted in my coining the term K-lobalization (Globalization with a K for Korea) several years ago. I saw K-lobalization as an emerging trend — Korean firms boldly promoted their unique management style and corporate culture internationally and across many markets. Recent manifestations are organization-wide, corporate-directed mandates from core value, vision, and management training directives to branding and even targeting specific consumers in local markets. Top management expects the implementation of these programs to be unchallenged and accepted without question by overseas teams. (As a side note, many strongly feel that displacing local norms and underutilizing local insights as a result of K-lobalization, especially in marketing, may not be in the best interest of the overseas operation.)

This said a new Korea facing topic, the role of the creative class, has piqued my interest. To clarify I am looking at the “culture” needed to foster the Creative Mind Process. In this study, I have present my views on the topic:

- Section 1 — The Gap in Norms
- Section 2 — An Edgy Korean Counter-culture?
- Section 3 — Roadmap for the Creative Class within Korean Global Organizations



Let me explain. In America, startups, technology, and innovation have tended to evolve in cities with diversity and strong counter-cultures. Examples are Boulder, Colorado; San Francisco, California; Austin, Texas and New York City, New York with additional scenes emerging, such as Nashville, Tennessee and my base of operation Golden, Colorado.

Within these communities I have witnessed amazing networking dynamics, not only in day-to-day interactions and dialogue conducive to entrepreneurs building their businesses, but also in access to funding and mentoring resources. To cite one example, on several occasions I have listened to the chats and pitches for Angel Funding in Caffe Centro in the South Park district in San Francisco. This is the area where Twitter and similar concepts were launched and is often referred to as Tech Ground Zero. Scores of tech companies and startups now call this area home. Listening to the creative buzz in conversations, one quickly understands why locating to these scenes is key. I frequently hear similar coffee shop launch pitches in Golden, Colorado.



Let me explain further. As academic Richard Florida points out in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, creatives as a group reflect a “powerful and significant shift in values, norms, and attitudes.” He describes these attitudes to be:

- 1) Individualism
- 2) Meritocracy
- 3) Diversity and Openness (which can translate to gender, sexual preference, race and my favorite “personal idiosyncrasies”)

An edgy Austin, Texas and The Beat's Jack Kerouac

Those familiar with the Korean workplace ... and by this I mean not only larger organizations but also the most progressive firms... recognize the stark disparity in these “creative” norms between Korea and the US.

In contrast to individualism within the creative class, in Korea we find deeply rooted collectivism. The group is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. In collectivistic societies, group goals take precedence over an individual’s objectives. This view does not deny the reality of the individual, but, ultimately, collectivism holds that one's identity is determined by the group(s) with which one is affiliated. Collectivistic cultures also require that individuals fit into the group—and “conform.”

Perhaps a less obvious gap that can occur between the U.S. and Korea is in “risk mindset.” Today the American entrepreneurs, angel investors and venture capitalists who launched Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Square and now Medium and Jelly/Super continue to look for, invest in and provide mentorship and guidance to what they hope will be the next success story. In most cases they are investing resources in multiple ventures and embrace a “fail fast” approach to their investments. They know and accept that occasional failures are part of the process. As Biz Stone (co-founder of Twitter and an early investor in Square and Medium, to name a few,) said at this year’s South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas, “The failure of one venture, Jelly, led to success at another venture, Super.me. ”

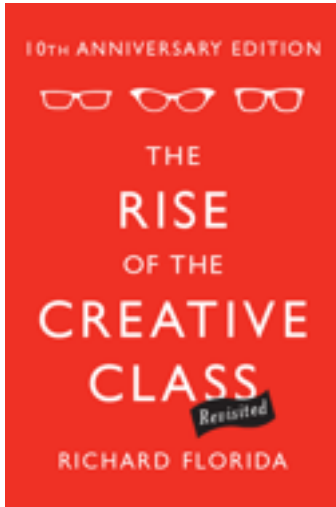


So getting back to Korea, the real challenge is not the lack of ideas or topnotch talent but rather the fostering of a culture of Diversity and Openness, tolerating failure, and even embracing non-conformity.

The good news.... I would not give up on Korea and a creative culture. More of my thoughts on this in the next two sections of this commentary.

## Part 2 An edgy Korean Counter-culture?

A strong Creative Class is key to sustaining a forward-leaning, innovative economy. Going hand in hand are workplaces that embrace diversity and openness and are not opposed to self-expression. This also means individual recognition for hard work is rewarded and coupled with attractive incentives (beyond just base pay). Additionally, we find that companies eager to attract creatives are open to locating in communities that offer an engaging and even edgy lifestyle.



So where do I see disconnects between South Korea and America?

For starters, in America the old Fordism and Company Man model has shifted at least for the creative class. Workers were once strongly tied to the company. Richard Florida nicely summed up this relationship, “You were a company man, identifying with the company and often moving largely in the circles created or dictated by it.” Today, creatives value their unique social identity, an identity that is able to move intact from firm to firm and personally assume both the risks and benefits that companies once absorbed.

In contrast, Korean workers continue to be rooted in Korean norms and collectivism and strongly identify with their company. This is most common for employees within the major Groups (Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK) but also applies to those working for high profile global brands in Korea (Nike, for example).

These organizations tend to be highly traditional vertical corporations. This means workload flows hierarchically down to teams who most often operate in silos. There is an expectation—teams following routines with long-established set norms.

In contrast, a creative work culture dies when regimented. The culture accepts that ideas are often conceptualized while networking with colleagues in a café over a latte or during a trail run.

All said, one could argue Korea may not be wired for fostering a sustainable creative culture.

What I do find encouraging is that on a personal level many Koreans are attracted to and appreciate counter-culture. There is an ever growing segment in their society adopting a lifestyle more conducive to creativity. Much of this influence has been a result of Koreans exposed to the global art scene, the influence of expat non-Koreans, plus Koreans embracing their own traditional artisan heritage. In some ways, this movement has taken on a rather edgy Bohemian feel.



Bob Dylan

An interesting example is the report by Korean media of the growing number of “dives with DJs and extensive collections of LPs,” many located in ultra-hip neighborhoods... with walls plastered with album covers from the likes of Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix and B.B. King. These may be considered shrines to Bob Dylan and Neil Young and the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

### Part 3: Roadmap for the Creative Class within Korea Global Organizations

As we look at the dynamics required to nurture a creative and innovative workplace, Korean work values, norms and attitudes surface as polar opposites to the characteristics of the western creative class workplace. Some core changes will be required if Korea aspires to develop a strong sustainable innovation-driven economy. Interestingly, the current South Korean president, Madame Park, Geun-hye recognized this and upon her election boldly proclaimed a “Creative Economy” as her platform for Korea’s economic growth over her 5 year term in office.



Madame Park, Guen-hye

Frankly, most in Korea’s private and public sector have found this high level government mandate difficult to embrace—in part because grasping the overall concept within their current society is challenging. . Furthermore, as I have pointed out, what drives a creative economy is not just creatives but the unique communities that align with their values and sustain their lifestyles. Over-hearing a tech startup chat in a trendy Golden, Colorado coffee shop Pangaea, I quizzed the three young entrepreneurs on “Why Golden?” Their response was 1) lifestyle, and more specifically rock climbing, 2) access to established startup and incubator hubs, such as Boulder and Denver, and 3) available local funding for startups from a quite wealthy community.



**SUPER**

To give another snapshot, in his weekly user group update co-founder of Twitter Biz Stone shared the view of Ben Finkel, his current venture Super.me partner, on their work culture:

*The world is our oyster. We get to build awesome software, dream up future products, use the best technologies, and get well paid for doing it. There's no handbook, but the challenge is part of the thrill.*

*We have tons of flexibility in our work style, no micromanaging and minimal bureaucracy. Of course, we can still improve our work processes, but this is another problem we get to collaboratively improve together.*

*Working with a small, creative group thinking up and building future products—that has always been my dream. Of course, the products won't work as planned, we'll have to adapt, redirect, and persist.*

On a broader playing field, I feel many Americans are wired for working in a creative environment. Some indicators to support this are well captured by Authors Josh Hammond and James Morrison in their book *The Stuff Americans Are Made Of*.

The authors cite seven cultural forces that define Americans:

- 1 Insistence on choice
- 2 Pursuit of impossible dreams
- 3 Obsession with big and more
- 4 Impatience with time
- 5 Acceptance of mistakes
- 6 Urge to improve
- 7 Fixation with what's new.

In a future work, I will suggest steps Korean companies need to take if they intend to build a creative workforce in their domestic Korean divisions. However, before I tackle that set of challenges, I would like to address the necessity for Korean overseas operations to be sensitive to the needs, values, and attitudes of the creatives with their local organizations. Studies show that up to 1/3 of the American workforce is now part of the creative class. The best companies recognize this trend.



My primary concern is that Korean companies with global operations may fail to recognize this reality. I feel Korean companies need to adopt a creative culture in the local market to recruit and retain this talent—a difficult challenge even for many American companies strongly rooted in older workplace norms. Again quoting Richard Florida, “ Many companies are merely presenting a cheap, façade of the alternative [creative culture]—a Ping-Pong table, perhaps an espresso machine.”

So for starters, Korean companies aspiring to draw upon local creative class talent will find that locating in the right community can be half the battle. This means a locale that embraces diversity and openness, with some counter-culture thrown in. Interestingly, we find there is considerable synergy among the creative class workforce within these communities even in diverse business sectors—a huge side benefit to any firm looking to nurture their workforce.

Perhaps a greater hurdle is ensuring that Korea workplace norms and company practices do not over-power and overtake local norms—resulting in a stifling of the very creativity the Korean company so desires. In the worst cases, top creatives will exit and those that stay will be stifled in their attempts at tapping their creativity.

Again this is not an easy task and is, frankly, one I that I address as a consultant by providing strategy, workarounds and solutions to leadership and teams, both Korean and Western. And I do have solutions...

If you and your company would like to discuss, I would be happy to chat. I acknowledge that each company has its own dynamics and I approach my work case-by-case crafting an approach tailored to the client.

Schedule a chat? <http://www.meetme.so/southerton>

or if you have a Direct Question? Go to [questions@koreabcw.com](mailto:questions@koreabcw.com)



Creative workspace