

CUL286 FLPA Tokyo: Cushman Wakefield Visit

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On March 1, the students in CUL286 visited the offices of [Cushman & Wakefield](#) to learn about cross-cultural communication. Vimbai Chikoori shares her experience in this interview with Maxine Britto.

Maxine: We visited the Cushman Wakefield offices in Tokyo today. What were some of your take-aways from their presentation about doing business in Japan?

Vimbai: Cushman & Wakefield is a leading global real estate firm that delivers various services such as real estate development and facilities management for occupiers and owners. Cushman & Wakefield is among the largest real estate services firms with approximately 50,000 employees in over 400 offices and 60 countries.

The Cushman Wakefield (CW) presentation and office tour was an excellent window into cross cultural business and communication. During the presentation the CW team members walked us through recent projects, including the construction of their Seoul office and Japanese office for Workday. Both projects showcased the importance of understanding cultural nuances, etiquette, behavior and history when doing business cross-culturally. Some of the points I found interesting were:

- **Decision Making:** The decision-making structure within Japanese business is different than western cultures. In North America, decisions are made quickly, even if companies have different decision-making processes. Meanwhile, in Japan, decisions are made through consensus. Therefore, it takes time to discuss and reach a consensus with executives, stakeholders and/or partners. The CW speaker expressed that western companies looking to enter the Japanese market must learn patience or risk being unsuccessful in this market.
- **Cross Cultural Design:** When designing for their various projects, the CW spoke about how much they learned about various Asian cultures and history in order to design their work environments. For the South Korean office, they designed and built elements to reflect the external environment (Gyeongbokgung Royal Palace and Han River) within the space. This created a great sense of place, while making the space feel unique, refreshing and culturally appropriate. Additionally, the speaker spoke about the cultural behaviors and considerations they designed for such as designing the office is based on how social interactions occurs between workers and guests. Also creating spaces for messages chairs because it is a trendy workplace amenity.

- Secondly, when designing for the Japanese workday office, the speaker elaborated on how they found appropriate ways to reflect culture and history in the office. For example, they painted the walls with traditional Japanese patterns and design trends without making the space feel kitsch-y. Additionally, the speaker shared a lesson on how history affects perspective and experience. When decorating the office with trinkets that resembled Workday's cloud logo, they learned it looked too similar to the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb. While not immediately apparent to the western members of the team, upon learning this they changed the decorations within the office to be more culturally appropriate. One strategy that the speaker shared on how to ensure appropriateness was to check-in with the team members of that culture.

Maxine: The Cushman Wakefield team spoke a lot about how Japanese business culture is changing and how the culture in Japanese-owned companies is often different from multi-national companies based in Japan. What are your thoughts?

Vimbai: It was very interesting to hear about Japanese business culture, how it's changing and about how multi-national companies are succeeding in Japan. One of the discussion topics that was fascinating was how more non-Japanese people were entering Japanese owned companies. For example, convenience stores franchises (7/11 and Family Mart) are businesses that can be found on every street corner. It is becoming more common for non-Japanese people to work in these stores. I learned that recently a non-Japanese person has become a franchise owner. And this trend is not just appearing in the retail space, non-Japanese people are entering into corporate executive roles. It will be interesting to observe how Japanese business culture changes as their workforce becomes more diverse.

Maxine: Given your previous educational and work experiences, as well as your current studies, what are your thoughts on communications in Japan and Canada?

Vimbai: As someone who has grown up and worked for a few years in various sectors in Canada, I have enjoyed learning about a different culture's business and communication style. During my time here, I have managed to glean some insights about Japanese business culture.

Within Japan, the workplace structure is hierarchical and structured. Therefore, everyone communicates and acts according to their role or seniority. Even in a boardroom or meeting setting people may sit according to that structure. In comparison, I have found North American companies to be less formal. They usually use their formal organization structure for purposes like HR or reporting. Of course, there is still hierarchy and communication rules (i.e., junior employees communicating through their management to contact upper management), but from my experience it's not very formal or structured socially.

Additionally, I found similarities between both cultures, such as meeting people through

introductions works better than cold calling. Seems like no matter where we are in the world, we can never escape networking culture. It seems that an important networking and communication tool is business cards. Properly presenting and receiving a business card is an important part of the business communication etiquette here. Meanwhile in North America, while business cards are still used, I have seen that people exchange LinkedIn handles more often.

*Vimbai is pictured here at [Meiji Jingu](#) shrine in Tokyo.