

Executive Life

Fending Off Babel In a Global Village

By JONATHAN B. LEVINE

ROBERT BISHOP grew up next door to one of Australia's immigrant hostels after World War II and remembers marveling at the creative talents of his Spanish, Greek and Latvian neighbors. Many of the women were educated professionals, a rarity in those days, and their children almost always rose to the top of their classes.

Taught as a child that Aussies were the best, he was rocked by this evidence to the contrary. It was his first inkling of the core principle of his career: "No country has a monopoly on good ideas."

Mr. Bishop, now chief executive of Silicon Graphics Inc., has become the quintessential global manager. Over 35 years, he and his Japanese wife, Yoshimi, have lived and worked on four continents as he built operations in 30 countries for three American high-technology companies. He has taught at business schools from Stockholm to Milan and counseled governments in Malaysia and Australia. Currently, Mr. Bishop, 59, is based at Silicon Graphics headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., while his wife maintains their home in Geneva and their three adult daughters pursue careers in Switzerland, England and the United States.

Mr. Bishop's continent-straddling profile is a prized commodity. In a recent study of 100 mostly non-American international executives chosen as exemplary by their companies, half had multicultural backgrounds, like having parents of different nationalities or being raised in more than one country. "There's no single kind of global manager," said Morgan W. McCall Jr., co-author of "Developing Global Executives" (Harvard Business School Press, 2002) and professor of management at the University of Southern California. "But the person who begins with global roots has a big advantage."

It was once enough to build international businesses by moving employees overseas or hiring local nationals, said Susan C. Schneider, a management professor at the University of Geneva and co-author of

"Managing Across Cultures" (Prentice Hall, 1997). But no more.

Management structures are shifting from country and regional sales units to worldwide product development and manufacturing organizations. And home-office staffs are usually a mélange of nationalities requiring managers with broad cultural understanding. "We've long had a borderless economy," Dr. Schneider said. "It's no surprise that we now have an elite corps of executives with borderless careers."

The most attuned managers have what she calls the "global mind-set" that allows them to pick up on local differences and leverage them around the world. It rarely develops without living in foreign cultures.

Mr. Bishop gained such a mind-set by seeking experience in three major markets: the United States, Japan and Europe. He found radically different management values but quickly learned to harness them wherever he went. To this day, he shares frank details of Silicon Graphics operations with all employees in quarterly teleconferences, a legacy of his years in Germany.

In Japan, he learned to hew to a long-term strategy, no matter the short-term demands of investors. "I continually get hazed by Wall Street, but I've learned not to blink," he said. After 10 quarters of losses, cash flow recently turned positive at Silicon Graphics, which appears to be back on track with robust sales of three-dimensional visualization applications to the military.

Another hallmark of the global executive is people skills — a challenge if you are dealing with people from a half-dozen cultures, Dr. McCall said. And, he warned, you can't assume that lessons learned in one foreign experience will apply to others.

Ask Sidney A. Taylor, president of Incal Pipeline Rehabilitation Inc. Since 1992, Mr. Taylor has honed his cultural sensibilities by running Incal, an oil pipeline maintenance company based in Houston, from Paris.

When he entered the Algerian market a few years ago, he expected the same high-caliber technical expertise of his client there that he had experienced elsewhere in the region.



Jimmy Pozarik for The New York Times

Robert Bishop, chief of Silicon Graphics, on a trip to Sydney. He grew up in Australia and has worked in the United States, Japan and Europe

But for weeks, a midlevel Algerian manager held up approval of a urethane coating for no apparent reason. Mr. Taylor soon realized that the manager was terrified of losing his well-paying job — a rare prize in most developing countries — over a wrong decision but lacked the technical skills necessary to make it. So Mr. Taylor simplified his pitch and won him over. "You learn to psychoanalyze people to get under the surface of what they're saying," he said.

TO get a feel for the local psyche, Mr. Bishop, the son of a long-shoreman, visits shipping docks and railroad yards wearing street clothes to talk with ordinary workers. "Understanding the underside of society in the struggle between rich and poor helps me develop empathy for the people of a country," he said. In turn, that builds trust with employees and customers.

His most gratifying "foreign" experience came in the 1970's in Atlanta as a senior executive at the Digital Equipment Corporation. A management rivalry between the Atlanta

office and Boston headquarters had grown bitter and taken on overtone of a North-South conflict. But because he was an Australian, with an Australian accent and Australian mannerisms, he was able to avoid being identified with either camp. Acting as a neutral broker, he said he mended the split and went on to lead his region to record-breaking sales.

The Internet does not diminish managers' need to understand local cultures, in Mr. Bishop's view. While global communications have simplified mundane tasks like local pricing, they have also freed management to spend more time on global manufacturing, marketing and financing strategies, he says, and those new duties will require more acute cultural antennae, not less. Mr. Bishop himself, in other jobs before coming to Silicon Graphics in 1991, made two round-the-world trips every quarter to visit local managers and customers. "The complexities aren't going away," he said. "There's no substitute for being there."