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## Soccer, a Cast of Nations and a Kind of Belonging

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So far, it's SalesMan United, 3, Real Nerdy, 0. But it's only the beginning of the soccer season, and there are a few more months before the Alacra Cup. Anything can happen.

The big warm-weather sport for most New York companies may be softball, but Alacra Inc., a Manhattan provider of online business and financial information to investment banks and corporations, has a soccer league. This makes sense: the sport is more popular abroad than here, and 40 percent of Alacra's employees were born outside of the United States, representing 15 countries including Belarus, British Guyana, Tajikistan and Bulgaria. Rosa, a software developer, is Spanish. Lydia, in customer care, is French. Saúl, from the Dominican Republic, also speaks Japanese. As it happens, the percentage of foreign-born employees perfectly mirrors the foreign-born population in New York City.

The five-year-old company did not plan to become a mini-United Nations; it just turned out that way. And the managers thank their stars it did. "When you get a really diverse group of people together, it's amazing what comes out of the mix," said Colin duSaire, 47, vice president for information management, in Caribbean-inflected English. Ajit Tharaken, 30, a software developer from Bangalore, India, says the sheer number of languages spoken by employees is a selling point to customers.

Such a multinational mix in a single workplace remains a rarity even in New York, where residents are used to traipsing down a city block and hearing a dozen foreign tongues. But demographers and social scientists say Alacra is a microcosm of the future.

"You tend to get diversity across companies rather than within," said John A. Challenger, the chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an upplacement of firm in Chicago. "More often companies are made up of communities, just like neighborhoods. But more and more we'll be seeing organizations that are highly multicultural."

That is just fine with the workers, who say the diversity bolsters their self-confidence and enlivens their social life both inside and outside the office.

Before she joined Alacra two years ago, Bouriana Zakhariyeva, 38, a native of Bulgaria, worked at a technology company in Massachusetts where "I was the only one with an accent."

"Not that anyone made a comment," she said, "but I was aware of it. Here I don't care. It makes me feel more relaxed here that there are so many international people."

Like many of her colleagues, Ms. Zakhariyeva was educated in the United States. (She has a master's degree in library science and a Ph.D. in literature from Rutgers University.) "This is something that brings us all together," she said.

Along with, not surprisingly, food and other treats. When people return to their native countries, they invariably bring back treats specific to their homelands: Bulgarian brandy called Pliska, Argentine cakes called alfajores, Uzbekistani wine known as Pamir and Russian chocolates called Mishka, or teddy bears, and share them with colleagues.

"If someone comes in with a strange-looking dish that smells fantastic, some of us are curious," said the marketing manager, Carol Ann Thomas, 33, a native-born American. "They ask, 'What kind of a dish is it? How do you make it?'"

The mix of so many nationalities makes for some interesting workplace conversations, too, on life, culture and religion. At a holiday party, the entire company joined in for a game of mock Jeopardy that covered the globe. (Whose grandfather was tutor to crown prince and now Emperor Akihito of Japan? Answer: Taro Kikkawa, 37, a software developer. Which manager was born in Great Britain? Answer: Colin duSaire, who was born in Northern Ireland but grew up in Jamaica.)

Some of the workers here say they find something comforting in not being the only stranger in a strange land. Rosa Sac, 35, who moved to the United States seven years ago from Madrid speaking not a word of English, said the mutual struggle to master a new language forms bonds of friendship. She socializes with Mr. duSaire, who left Jamaica 17 years ago, for example, and with Ms. Thomas.

Alacra employees also say they enjoy arguing about politics and religion - topics that Americans tend to shy away from for fear of offending somebody. "It's an incredibly free exchange of ideas," said Bob De Laney, 34, vice president for sales and an Irish-American who lives in suburban Morristown, N.J. "We have the entire range of the spectrum politically here, from far left to far right. Debates get heated."

Employees also appreciate the chance they have to correct what they view as misperceptions about their country. When his officemates read a rather bleak newspaper account of the railroads in Cameroon, for example, William Monangai, 37, a software developer from that country, felt he had to set them straight. "A lot of African countries are very corrupt, but the reality was not as bad as was portrayed in the newspaper," he said.

And then there are the practical benefits of being able to schmooze with an international cast of characters. When Mr. De Laney was planning a trip to China, he says, he asked Tun He, 35, a software developer from China, for the "honest poop." And Mr. He helped eliminate the parts of the tours that were a waste of time, too expensive, boring or mundane, he says.

Another bond that holds the group together is, of course, soccer, the world sport. SalesMan United is a bad pun on Manchester United, said Mr. De Laney, while Real Nerdy was a natural choice for the company's software developers. Games are usually held at East River Park, with about 11 people on each team. Squads of friends, relatives and colleagues cheer them on.

The clash of nationalities among the players themselves takes the form of endless ribbing and bragging. "The Russians think their team is the best," Mr. De Laney said. "Carlos from Argentina doesn't just think Argentina is the best. He refuses to accept that there are any other teams in the world. South American players are known for faking injuries."

After the games, both teams troop off to one of the nearest Greenwich Village bars that can accommodate about 25 men covered in mud for dinner and drinks that can drag out into the early morning hours. The losing team has to pick up the tab. Ribbing - and sports - aside, employees say the best thing about their office environment is, well, the office environment. Because so many family members live outside the United States, colleagues become like an extended family.

"If my brothers were here, I'd call on them for advice, but instead I call on my friends," said Mr. Monangai, who has been in this country since 1983 (his parents still live in Cameroon).

"I just built a pool, and we're going to have a pool party in the summer," he added. "Everybody seems to be looking forward to having a good time, like a family would."