

Jesuits Inc.

Ashley Potter meets Jose Bento da Silva who believes business can learn a lot from the original multinational organisation, the Jesuits



When former nightclub bouncer Jorge Mario Bergoglio was made the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church in March 2013 the world's media spotlight was suddenly shone on the little known Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic order of priests founded half a millennium ago.

Known as the Jesuits, Bergoglio is the first of them to be made Pope as well as being the first from the Americas, adopting the papal name Saint Francis of Assisi.

The Society of Jesus was founded by the Basque nobleman, soldier and future saint, Ignatius of Loyola, who turned to religion after a French cannonball blew part of his leg off in Pamplona in 1521. The society secured papal approval in 1540.

For more than a decade Jose Bento da Silva has been studying the Jesuits, but not as a historian. Bento da Silva's interest lies in how the Jesuits have successfully managed a global organisation for nearly 500 years, with nearly 200,000 employees spread across the globe.

It is the sort of operation from which businesses can learn, especially those wanting to put 'going global' at the core of their structure. Bento da Silva believes the Jesuits are not only the first multinational organisation but the only truly global operation, adapting their culture to fit each geographical region since their inception.

Bento da Silva, an Assistant Professor of Organisational Studies, says: "The Jesuits are truly global, not only in the

sense that they adapt locally their businesses, or that they have an international presence. The Jesuits are truly global because they have no country of origin: they are neither a Basque, nor a Spanish, Italian, French, or a Portuguese company – they are just a global organisation. What they do across the globe is, though, completely different – it's tailored to the culture. All these lessons and all this material that we teach MBA students at business schools, the Jesuits have been doing for almost 500 years in quite a natural way."

The Jesuits' relevance for the understanding of our own culture is beyond what we sometimes acknowledge or even grasp as Bento da Silva's research has discovered just how influential they are.

The first Europeans to reach the Himalayas were Jesuits; the first Europeans to cross the Mississippi River were Jesuits; the first people to cross Africa from coast to coast were Jesuits; the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo was founded by a Jesuit; Descartes, one of the fathers of

modern philosophy, trained as a Jesuit; 18 craters on the moon are named after Jesuits; our calendar was created by the Jesuits. And you could go on and on.

"Their impact on science is huge" says Bento da Silva. "So many scientific developments right up to the beginning of the 20th century came from Jesuits. Friedrich Hayek, the Nobel Prize winner, traces the emergence of liberal views on economics back to 16th century Jesuits."



Jesuits travelling to Northern Rhodesia, August 1951

But Bento da Silva's real interest is to study how the Jesuits' organisational structure has evolved and how the way they are organised might explain why they have always been so successful. "Instead of putting the emphasis on strategy, they devoted most of their first 20 years trying to devise the perfect organisational structure," says Bento da Silva.

"What is interesting about them is that they're one of the very few organisations that has never changed structure although they have grown a lot."

As the Jesuits contemplated their structure they looked to the recent past for inspiration and Venice was the obvious place. From the 13th to the 15th century the Italian port was the centre of world trade.

"Some of the key structural dimensions they took from business ventures that they knew in Venice because their founder Ignatius spent a lot of time there. His key lieutenant was the son of a Venice merchant," says Bento da Silva.

"They developed a very simple and basically network-based structure and with it they were able to rapidly spread across the globe, in a way that very few organisations can achieve; it is quite amazing. Of course from a human resources point of view they have some advantages over other organisations – it's different having a religious vow to a contract."

The structure put in place by Ignatius remains in place and when they set up a new network, they simply repeat it.

Bento da Silva adds: "The Jesuits may have 200,000 employees but not below a hierarchical structure. Instead they have mainly three hierarchical levels and they're organised along geographical regions. So they have their headquarters in Rome and then they have people managing several, what they call, 'provinces' that we would call geographical regions. Pope Francis was in charge of one of these provinces, Argentina, he was Provincial of Argentina."

The Jesuits have operations in more than 100 countries spread across six continents and though strategy is devised in its Vatican headquarters, the regions are given plenty of leeway in implementing them.

"The provincials have lots of autonomy in terms of managing the daily operations in each geographical region, but the strategy is devised at the headquarters, following the procedures of the General Congregation – the equivalent of, in the corporate world, a shareholders' assembly," says Bento da Silva. "Now below all these regions you can have lots of different businesses because they have a very simple way of approaching strategy."

"They have five key strategic principles. Education, which is their main business; intellectual activity – so

engaging with universities and higher education; China as a single market – they've been obsessed with it since the 17th century; Africa as a continent; and refugees, either war refugees, political, or urban refugees."

Education is probably the most famous of the Jesuits' missions. "Since the 17th century the Jesuits have had the biggest network of private schools in the world," says Bento da Silva. "They have lots of universities across the world and lots of high schools."

This has proved to be either a good source of funding since the 16th century, or a way of engaging with state-of-the-art knowledge, or educating those in most need. It is, therefore, for Bento da Silva, one of its most distinctive strategic endeavours.

He says: "Through education the Jesuits can spread the gospel, educate, network with other areas of knowledge rather than the religious, and help people move from poverty by giving them access to education."

With so many companies putting corporate social responsibility at the heart of their strategy, like the Anglo-Dutch multinational Unilever's plan to make sustainability commonplace, businesses could learn a thing or two from the Jesuits.

Bento da Silva is to study one particular network in the Jesuits, its refugee service, which again uses the approach of leveraging resources from all over the world while at the same time not being associated with any particular country.

"The Jesuit Refugee Service is, like the Jesuits themselves, a truly global organisation," adds Bento da Silva. "They're replicating their way of structuring an organisation, so the headquarters of the Jesuit Refugee

Service organisation is in Rome; the refugee camps are around Africa and Asia mainly, but one of their main activities there is teaching. They have a distance learning programme and in 2013 they had their first graduates on a three-year arts course, taught in the refugee camps by their network of universities in the United States.

"This is very interesting as their headquarters are in Rome, their clients in Africa and Asia, and people doing the teaching and delivering a degree from a United States university. Although this seems a very simple arrangement, it is not that easy for business corporations to replicate. If you think about it, how many organisations with around 200,000 employees spread across more than 100 countries and surviving for almost 500 years do you know? None."

With many top businessmen like Richard Branson predicting that only companies with a social conscience will be tolerated by an increasingly demanding public, the results of Bento da Silva's study of the Jesuits could have a wide impact. ■



Jesuit Refugee Service Ecuador

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Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis), street art wall portrait