



UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

Shared Service Centre Experience:

The social relation of the shared service centre employees

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Resumo

Nesta tese de mestrado é analisada a relação social dos funcionários do Centro de Excelência do Porto que trabalham no *shared service centre* da COFCO, líder na indústria agrícola e alimentar na China e um dos principais comerciantes mundiais em agro-produtos. O estudo do tema inclui uma revisão de literatura, uma entrevista, um questionário *online* e a experiência pessoal da autora como estagiária na empresa onde a análise foi realizada.

Os principais resultados indicam que o trabalho dos colaboradores do Centro de Excelência do Porto e das unidades às quais prestam serviços requerem que ambas as partes estejam em constante contacto. Além disso, foi também identificado que a relação social entre os colaboradores do Centro de Excelência do Porto se formou em contexto de teletrabalho devido à pandemia de Covid-19.

No geral, a relação entre os colaboradores do Centro de Excelência do Porto e as unidades às quais prestam serviços é maioritariamente profissional e raramente pessoal.

O *shared service centre* é fundamental para as operações da COFCO International.

Palavras-chave: Shared Service Centre; COFCO International; Relação Social

Abstract

The aim of this master thesis is to analyze the social relationship of the Porto Excellence Centre employees who work in a shared service centre of COFCO, the leader of the agricultural and food industry in China, and one of the world's leading agri-product traders with global footprints. The research for this paper includes a literature review, an interview, an online survey and the personal experience of the author as an intern in the company where the analyses was made.

The main results indicate that the work the employees of the Porto Excellence Office and the units they provide services do require for both parties to be in constant interaction. Moreover, it was also identified that the social relations between the employees of the Porto Excellence Office were formed in a remote working context due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall, the social relation between the employees of the Porto Excellence Office and the units they provide services to is manly professional and rarely personal.

The shared service centre is fundamental for COFCO International operations.

Keywords: Shared Service Centre; COFCO International; Social Relation

3396 words

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List of Abbreviations

CIL: COFCO International

LBH: Lionesa Business Hub

SSC: Shared Service Centre

Introduction

The present report is the outcome of an internship in COFCOINTL II Service Portugal, Unipessoal Lda. between September 6 of 2021 and February 28 of 2022 for the conclusion of the Master in Management with a specialization in business analytics in Católica Porto Business School (CPBS).

The selection of COFCO International took in account to the fact that the internship provided was in the financial department of a big international company. Furthermore, the concept of a shared service centre was unknown to the author. Therefore, all considered, it was seen as an opportunity that provided an experience for the author's professional and personal development.

During the internship, the author worked in the accounts payable department in the shared service centre scenario for COFCO International.

Most of the literature about shared service centres (SSCs) approach their implementation leaving few papers that analyze the outcome of such structural change. Initially, the author was going to analyze the financial effects of the implementation of an SSC. However, after some literature review, she come to the conclusion that previous research was not able to elucidate the financial and nonfinancial consequences of SSC introduction. On that account, a different approach was taken and, the aim of this paper is to analyze the social relationship of the Porto Excellence Centre employees. Employee relations are an important support in the perception of the work environment and the situation of an individual at work (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021).

This thesis starts with the presentation of the company where the internship was held followed by an in-depth presentation of the shared service centre in Porto. Next, follows the chapter that provides a literature review on the "Shared Service Centre" topic. The "Methodology" chapter elucidates the methods used

for the analyses of the relation in study: an interview, an online survey and the personal insight of the author who was working in the shared service scenario. The following chapters consist in the analysis of the survey answers and the discussion of the results. Finally, in the last chapter, the main conclusion and further studies are exposed.

The Company

“Founded in 1949, COFCO Corporation (COFCO) is the leader of the agricultural and food industry in China, and one of the world's leading agri-product traders with global footprints and fully-integrated value chain” (<http://www.cofco.com/en/AboutCOFCO/>).

COFCO takes agri-products as its core business since it is focused on “including grain, oil, sugar, cotton, meat and dairy products, as well as food, finance, and real estate as three major complementary businesses”.

COFCO International (CIL) is one of the COFCO Corporation’s 17 specialized subsidiaries (<http://www.cofco.com/en/AboutCOFCO/>). Founded in September 2014, and headquartered in Geneva (Switzerland) since April 2028, it is the overseas agriculture business platform for COFCO Corporation. The company is focused on being the leader in the global grains, oilseeds, and sugar supply chains.

COFCO International supplies agriculture products around the world through a globally vertically integrated supply chain, originating from surplus producing regions to supply regions with high demand. It sources grains, oilseeds, cotton, and coffee from major producing countries. Then collects, stores, and handles those products until it comes the time when they are processed and refined. Through various trading platforms, products are supplied to customers through efficient transportation and distribution networks.



Figure 1: Global Agri-business (COFCO, 2021 see Annex 1)

Portugal holds two COFCO international companies (CIL), one in Lisbon and the other in the Porto district. The internship was done in COFCOINTL II Services Portugal, Unipessoal Lda a subsidiary of CIL in the Lionesa Business Hub (LBH), Leça do Balio, Matosinhos. Officially inaugurated in 2019 it houses teams in finance, IT, accounting, procurement, sustainability, and more. Furthermore, it includes the Porto Excellence Office, a shared service centre for 35 units of the COFCO group.

Porto Centre of Excellence

In 2019 the Porto Centre of Excellence was officially inaugurated with teams vital to the smooth function of the COFCO global operations.

According to Davis (2005), the location of the eventual destination of the SSC needs to be given careful consideration. SSCs operate in intercultural environments and there is evidence that national cultures affect SSCs' implementation success and work performance (Richter & Brühl, 2017). For example, studies found that cultural barriers hamper the transfer of competencies (Davis, 2005), whereas communication barriers negatively influence service quality (He & Cao, 2009). Factors that make a site promising include the presence of an educated, low cost labour force with foreign language skills; adequate telecommunications; accessibility by air; safety; stability; and a favourable regulatory environment (Davis, 2005).

For the implementation of the excellence centre, several parameters were considered such as cost and availability of labour, foreign language skills, governmental policies and political stability (Bóia, 2021). Another important factor is the time zone. Portugal has only an hour difference to the CIL headquarters and a 3 hour difference to Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Moscow. Therefore, Portugal is a strategical point, making it possible to communicate with most countries where the multinational operates during labour hours. Moreover, Portugal has good airline connections to several markets where COFCO operates and a good knowledge of Portuguese, Spanish and English languages (Neves, 2009). Overall, Portugal is a communication bridge of extreme importance for the COFCO subsidiaries.

Both small and large organizations possess various kinds of expertise that cannot be accessed beyond the organizational boundaries (Janssen et al., 2009). Therefore, in order to smoothen the implementation of the shared service centre and increase the quality of its operations, several employees took part in activities such as spending a week in Argentina learning how the processes were performed and mapping them. This tightened the relations between the Porto Centre of Excellence and the Argentina subsidiary. However, with the employee rotation, most connections that were formed are not relevant in the present day. Nevertheless, Porto Centre of Excellence is a SSC with a partially shared model (Janssen et al., 2009) regarding the subsidiaries in Argentina since there are three employees of the Porto Excellence Centre in those units providing services.

During the signing of an agreement for the establishment of COFCO International's Centre of Excellence for corporate shared services in Portugal, the Chairman and CEO of COFCO International at the time foresaw the Centre of Excellence playing a key role in supporting the global business growth and efficiency enhancement programme. In fact, the rapid recruitment of employees demonstrates the need for this office, having already exceeded the space capacity limit.

Shared Service Centre

Shared service centers have risen greatly in relevance and importance over the past few years in the private sector. However, according to an extensive literature review done by Schulz & Brenner in 2010, a standardized definition of SSCs is not established. Nevertheless, some characteristics that define the term SSC are mentioned in most publications. So an SSC is “an organizational concept that consolidates processes within the group in order to reduce redundancies; delivers support processes; has cost cutting as a major driver; that has a clear focus on internal customers; is a separate organizational unit that is aligned with external competitors and is operated like a business” (Schulz & Brenner, 2010, p. 217).

The increase in the relevance and importance of the SSCs may be due to the expected greater pressure for large companies to adopt shared services strategies. The fixed costs of setting an SSC are more likely to be recovered through the rationalization of business processes or the improvement of the service. Larger organizations typically exhibit greater inefficiencies due to the higher coordination costs that they need to incur to manage their internal processes (Schulz & Brenner, 2010).

Richter & Brühl (2017), in the analysis of different studies, found that economic motives, such as cost saving, are the most common drivers for the implementation of SSC, followed by strategic motives, such as improving service quality and process advancement. However, there are mixed opinions in relation to the expectations of SSCs. Some consider that those are often high, and sometimes not entirely realistic (Ulbrich, 2006). While in the Janssen et. al study (2009), efficiency and customer orientation improved with the implementation of a shared service centre. Moreover, reports related to SSC outcomes found mixed

effects on financial consequences. While some reports showed significant cost savings, others predicted no reduction in public administrations cost (Richter & Brühl, 2017). Leading scholars to affirm that the general efficacy of SSCs is not reliable enough to measure (Richter & Brühl, 2017).

Methodology

To analyze the social relation of the shared service centre employees, a survey was made.

This survey was based on an informal interview with a Porto Excellence Office employee. The interview was made in person, even though the employees are mainly working only two times a month in the office, as diligence for the Covid-19 pandemic. The decision to make informal interviews was taken in order to obtain knowledge in the first person about the relations in analysis and information about the entity that is not public.

The script for the interview (see Annex 2) was semi structured in order to give the interviewee free range to elaborate their answers. During the interview, it was asked what the person's journey in the company was, given that many have worked in other positions. Plus, it was also asked about the relation the interviewee has with their colleagues, both in Porto Excellence Office and in the other units. This form of interview provided information for the making of the questionnaire and ultimately comprehending the relations in study.

Furthermore, the internship provided the author with experience in the daily operations of the shared service centre in study. During the internship, it was possible and necessary to be in contact with different departments and the units the Porto Excellence Office provides services which gave a unique insight into the relations in analysis.

Plus, the study of different articles about shared service centres referenced throughout this thesis also provided information for the making of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire (see Annex 3) was divided into 3 sections:

- The personal data section, where it was collected personal information from the employees, being the most important how long they have been working in COFCO International;
- The Porto Centre of Excellence section, that provided information about the relations between the employees in Porto;
- The Shared Service Centre section, in which it was collected information about the employees, in regard to their social relation with the employees from the units the Porto Centre of Excellence provides services to and also their personal experience with shared service centres.

Survey Analysis

The survey was sent via email to the 25 persons that work in the Porto Excellence Centre in the SSC scenario. 11 persons answered the questionnaire. Therefore, considering an 80% confidence level, the margin of error is 15%. However, it is important to disclose that, besides the survey, the work experience and interview also give insight into the relation in analysis. Therefore, a lower confidence level is acceptable.

The age segmentation was done according to the generations people are a part of. Therefore, from the data collected, it is possible to notice that a little more than half (55%) are a part of the generation Y (millennials), almost 30% are part of the generation Z and lastly, 18%, are generation X (see figure 2). Furthermore, practically the same amount of men and women responded to the survey and there was no one who considered themselves non-binary.

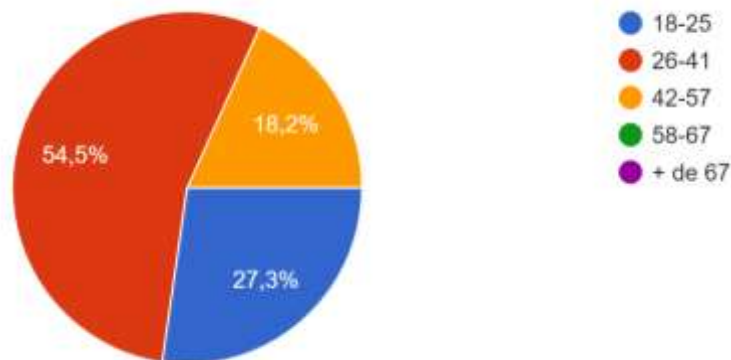


Figure 2: Age Distribution

The majority of the surveyed people (64%) have been working for COFCO for less than a year (see figure 3). Moreover, due to Covid-19, the company has a working from home policy, which discriminates that it is only necessary to go to the office twice a month. Therefore, since most employees have only been

working there for less than a year, it can be concluded that the relations between the employees were formed in a remote working context. So, there is less personal contact between each other, and less time spent together physically, considering that the majority of the contact is with messages or phone calls via teams. Furthermore, it was commented by one individual that the team is transparent, and that teamwork is crucial to the functioning of the department. This communication can be either for related or non-related work issues since almost half (46%) have reported to have communicated with people they work with in the Porto Centre of Excellence for personal issues.

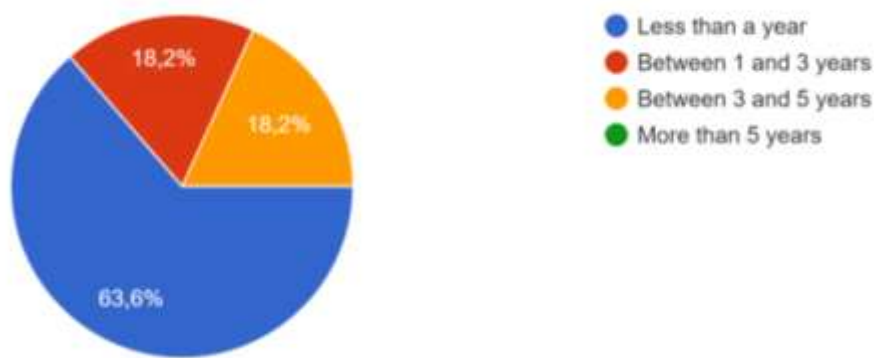


Figure 3: Months/Years the employees have been working for COFCO International

In terms of rating the relationship, the employees have with their peers between the parameters excellent, good, satisfactory and needs improvement. Almost half (46%) reported to have a good relation, then the most prevalent was satisfactory (27%) followed by excellent (18%) (see figure 4). Only one person revealed that their relationship needs improvement.

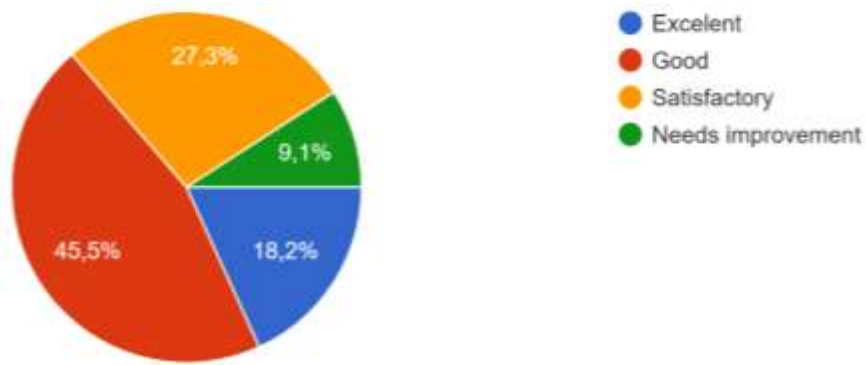


Figure 4: Employees' relation with the colleagues from the Porto Centre of Excellence

Moreover, almost half (54%) of the surveyed have worked in other shared service centres and revealed that they took part in activities for the implementation of the shared service centre such as mapping processes, build the change management, and training newcomers.

Even though the Porto Excellence Office provides services to 35 units, not everyone is in contact with every unit. In fact, the most prevalent answer in the survey (27%) was to provide services to 3 and 5 units. Then, with 20%, are both the extremes, one and the full 35 units. Finally, 10% provides services to 2 units. Moreover, when asked how frequently they communicate with the colleagues in said units more than half (55%) revealed that they communicate many times a day while 18% few times or once a day and 27% few times a week (see figure 5).

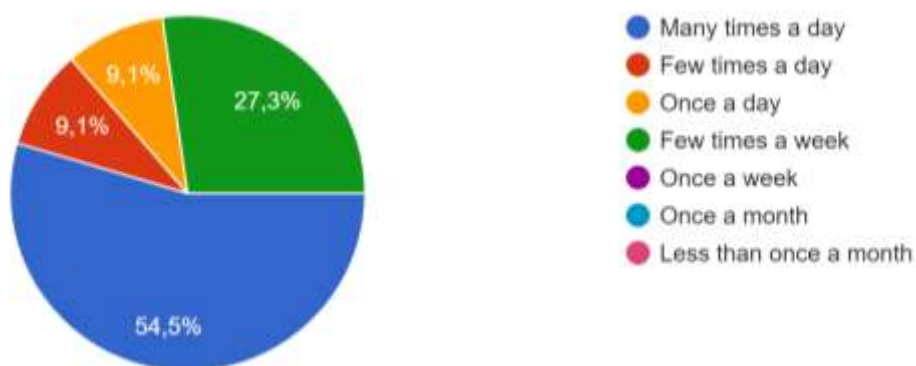


Figure 5: Frequency of communication with colleagues from other COFCO units.

Furthermore, the surveyed people evaluated the relationship they had with their colleagues in other units mostly as good (55%) then 27% as satisfactory and both extremes of excellent and needs improvement had an 9% answer rate (see figure 6). However, no one communicates with people from other units of COFCO for non-related work issues.

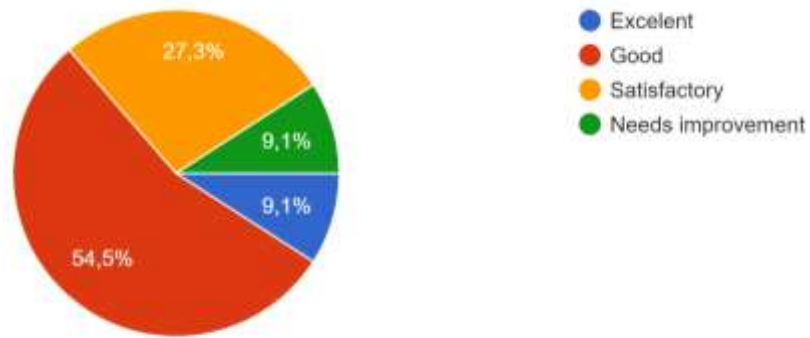


Figure 6: Employees' relation with the colleagues from other COFCO units

The employees of Porto Centre of Excellence view the existence of a SSC mainly as an advantage (64%). However, 27% are not sure and 9% said that it wasn't an advantage.

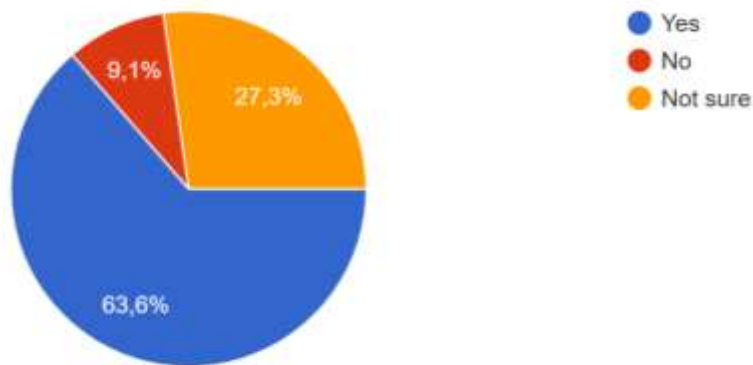


Figure 7: Employees' perception of the SSC as an advantage

Discussion

With the implementation of remote working and the occupational stress resulting from the pandemic, employee relations have been transformed (Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska, 2021). While previously the communication was done face to face, currently it is done mainly by messages or calls via teams making it harder to form meaningful connections between one another. However, even though the pandemic was an obstacle, the employees revealed to have good and satisfactory relations with their peers. Plus, the fact that they have talked about personal issues with each other is an indicator of such. Since an individual who can talk to his or her colleagues and exchange not only work-related information, but also inquiries about well-being or polite conversation, builds a bond within the team. Furthermore, having a sense of support and a friendly working environment contributes to a positive perception of work (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021). Studies to date show that social interaction has an important role to play in shaping job satisfaction (Gottman et al., 1998).

On the other hand, the communication with the employees in the units the Porto Centre of Excellence provides services to has always been electronic, making the time of day, geographical distance, and physical presence not important (Morgan & Symon 2002).

It is relevant to note that throughout the pandemic in order to promote socialization within the company events were done. For example, whenever new members join the company it is done a video call with all members of COFCO International, called Town hall, where they present themselves to the company.

A centralized network is characterized by loose relationships since the distance between the employees within the shared service arrangements is quite

large (Janssen et al., 2012). In order to analyze this relation, it is important to note that not every employee of the Porto office provides services to every unit. Furthermore, depending on what department they are a part of they also communicate with different individuals.

In general, most employees communicate daily and the rest on a weekly basis, therefore there is a constant interaction between both parties which is key to building a relation. Furthermore, the employees from the Porto shared service centre stated that they have a good or satisfactory relation with the employees from the units they provide services to. Moreover, it was also stated that “the transparency are always present in all the discussions” and that “everyone has been very polite”. However, no one communicates about non-work related issues which is an indicator of a looser bond. This is in congruence with what was stated by one employee that the relation is “only professional”.

Lastly, the employees of Porto Centre of Excellence view the existence of a SSC mainly as an advantage having stated that “it allows to have the knowledge of how processes are made in a single unit making it more efficient” and that “the knowledge acquired of all processes and also systems, are crucial to the company.” However, it was stated that it is “harder to know with whom to communicate in order to elucidate simple errors or minor issues”.

Conclusion and Further Studies

With the increase in shared service centres, research on the matter is becoming increasingly important. Furthermore, due to the role that social interaction has in shaping job satisfaction (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021), and the fact that SSC is characterized by having loose relationships (Janssen et al., 2012), it is relevant to analyze the social relations of the employees in a SSC scenario.

The work that the employees of the Porto Excellence Office and the units they provide services do require both parties to be in constant interaction. However, from the data collected, the relation is mainly professional. On the other hand, the bond between the employees of the Porto Excellence Centre is deeper. However, the fact that an individual can have a good relation with several people and a bad relation with only one may lead to a lower perceived general relation compared to the real general one. Therefore, aggregating the relations an individual has with all employees in a single question may not reflect the actual relation the employee has as a whole. It would be necessary to analyze every single relation to fully determine their nature. Another limitation of this study is the fact that only 25 employees are a part of the Porto Excellence Centre in the SSC scenario, therefore in order to better understand the relation between the employees of a shared service centre and the employees of the units they provide services to, future research should cover other companies. An additional limitation is the fact that the company has a working from home policy making it harder to obtain the necessary data.

Nevertheless, the Porto Centre of Excellence is a vertebra of the CIL backbone and, therefore, the responsibilities of the Porto branch are indispensable for the functioning of the company.

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Annexs

Annex 1: COFCO International Factsheet

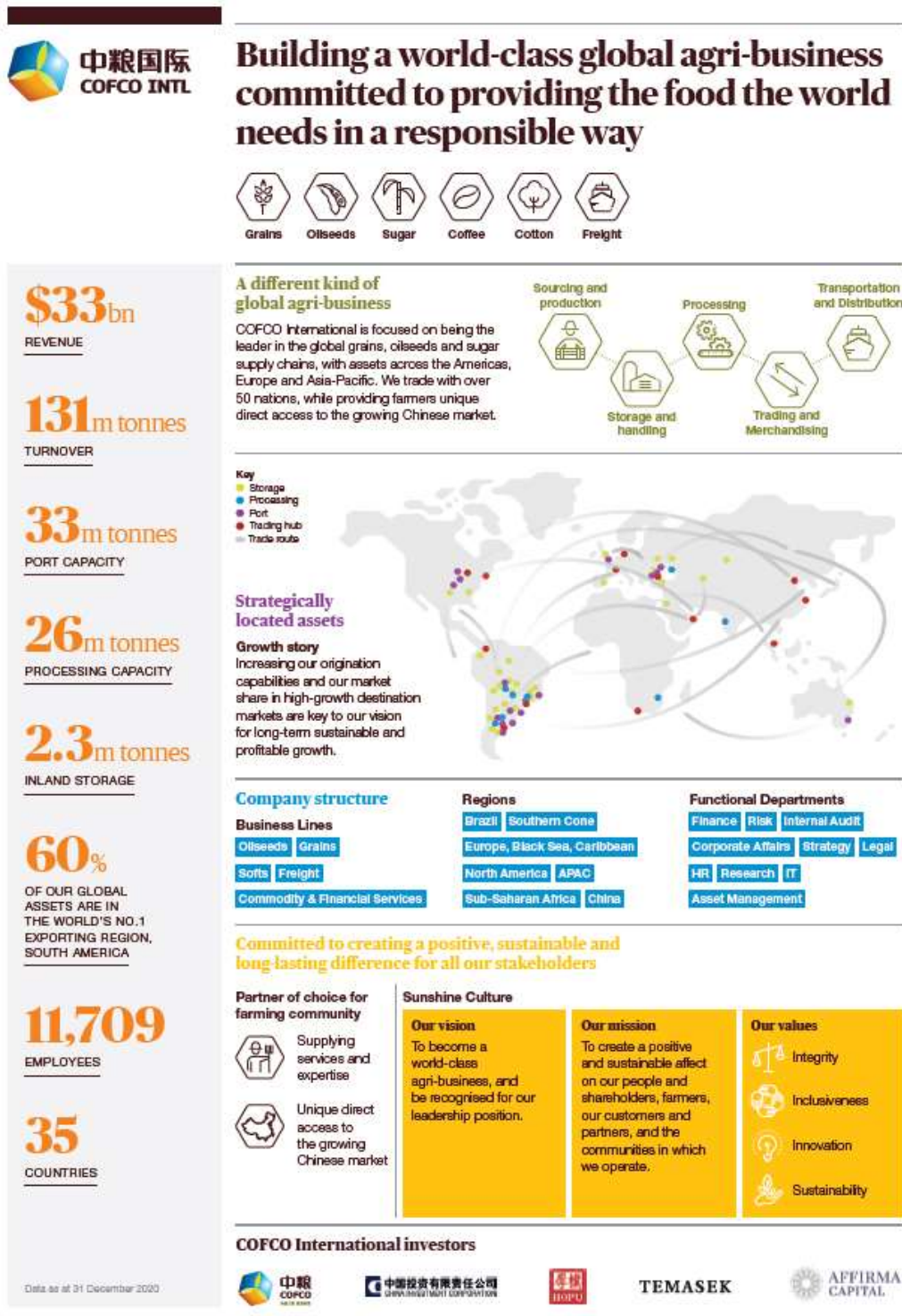


Figure 8: COFCO Factsheet

Annex 2: Interview script

- What was your professional path inside COFCO?
- What functions does each department of the shared service centre has?
- Do you consider that there are departments that have more communication with other units?
- In what way do you evaluate the relation you have with people from other offices?

Annex 3: The Shared Service Centre Experience Survey

Personal Data

What is your age?

- 18-25
- 26-41
- 42-57
- 58-67
- + de 67

Gender

- Female
- Male
- _____

What department are you a part of?

- Procure to Pay (PRs Processing, T&E Processing and Invoice Processing)

- Order to Cash (Cash Application)
- Record to Report (Bank Reconciliation)
- Master Data
- _____

How many months/years have you been working for COFCO International?

- Less than a year
- Between 1 and 3 years
- Between 3 and 5 years
- More than 5 years

Porto Centre of Excellence

Have you communicated with people you work with in the Porto Centre of Excellence for non-related work issues?

- Yes
- No

How do you evaluate the relationship you have with the colleagues from Porto Centre of Excellence?

- Excelent
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Needs improvement

If possible please elaborate the previous answer.

The Shared Service Centre

Have you worked in other shared service centers?

- Yes
- No

Did you took part in any activity for the implementation of the shared service centre?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please briefly describe what it was.

With how many COFCO units are you in touch?

— —

Mention the ones you provide services too.

How frequently do you comunicate with colleagues from other COFCO units?

- Many times a day
- Few times a day
- Once a day
- Few times a week
- Once a week
- Once a month
- Less than once a month

How do you evaluate the relationship you have with the colleagues in other units?

- Excelent
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Needs improvement

If possible please elaborate the previous answer.

Have you communicated with people you work with in other units of COFCO for non-related work issues?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever worked in other units of COFCO International?

- Yes
- No

If yes, do you continue working in proximity with the COFCO units you previously worked in?

- Yes
- No

Do you consider that employees of Porto Centre of Excellence view the existence of a shared service centre an asset/advantage for the COFCO group?

- Yes
- No

Not sure

If possible please elaborate the answer.
