How to overcome
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
when managing
OFFSHORE OR NEARSHORE TEAMS

lessons learned in offshoring and nearshoring

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HUGO MESSER

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Foreword

This is the forth eBook in a series of eBooks that will be published within a couple of months' interval and later on into one printed book. These eBooks are being written through a crowdwriting project and the authors are experts from all over the world.

We welcome any suggestions or feedback for further improvement. If you are interested in the upcoming Books or are an experienced practitioner who would like to contribute with your knowledge, please e-mail :

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Introduction

In the world of offshoring and global collaboration, there is no topic that is more widely discussed that cultural differences. Or maybe there is one: communication. People with experience in managing remote teams often cite communication as their biggest challenge. But what is communication? And if communication is the problem, where do we start the solution? In most cases, one of the best starting point is 'culture' (the others being people and process, which we describe in our other books).

The goal of this book is to give you practical insights on how to manage cultural differences when managing offshore or nearshore teams. Culture is a 'soft' topic, more a concept than something driven by analytics and data. There is no step by step 'how to' approach to deal with cultural differences. The only thing to do for people working with other cultures, is to learn as much as possible about the other culture. To make this learning effective, this book presents articles on how to understand culture on a more general level as well as real life experiences on cultural differences for a specific country. All authors come from different backgrounds and write from their own experience.

In the first chapter, Bert van Hijfte, a Dutch culture trainer specialised in Indian culture, writes about culture and communication in the outsourcing industry. Bert has trained many teams at companies like HCL, Aegon, Achmea, in various countries around the world. An industry veteran, he describes the way the outsourcing industry evolved in the past decades and how the current world of high attrition, influences the cultural divide. He cites the famous book of Hofstede and uses this to explain how to approach the cultural differences.

Chapter two is written by a famous cross cultural author from the US, Gayle Cotton. She has written a bestseller 'SAY Anything to Anyone, Anywhere! 5 Keys to Successful Cross-Cultural Communication'. Gayle describes a global 'etiquette', a set of guidelines for behavior across different cultures.

Chapter three is written by Rajiv Mathew, head of Marketing at Compassites Software . He is a hands-on technology marketing & communications professional with proven expertise in multiple facets of the marketing spectrum. Rajiv describes various Cultural aspects in international business.

In the forth chapter, I describe the magic of 'empathy' to bridge cultural differences. Based on my own experience, I see a mismatch between technologists and empathy. I describe on what levels (team, company, product, culture) stimulating empathy can improve the odds that globally distributed teams succeed.

Chapter five is written by Natalya Veremeeva. Natalya lives in Ukraine and has worked for several outsourcing providers from Ukraine. She writes a story from the heart about her perception on Ukrainian (and in the broader sense: Soviet) culture. The guidelines she gives make it easier for any Western company to understand the intricacies of Eastern Europe.

Ged Roberts, a senior executive at TCS, describes the cultural differences between Dutch and Indians in chapter 6. As a native Brit, he can reflect on the differences from a 'neutral' perspective. He zooms in to some specifics about each culture, which we can use in our daily collaboration between India and

the Netherlands.

Chapter 7 is written by Jennifer Kumar who, originally from the US, lives in India since 2011. Jennifer organizes many trainings for Indians about the US culture. In the article, she gives guidelines on how to effectively give and use trainings. This gives us insights in getting the maximum value from a training and gives trainers details to pay attention to while giving a training.

Chapter 1 - Culture and Communication - About Outsourcing, Offshoring, and a Changing World

By: Bert van Hijfte

It so happened somewhere in the mid–nineties that a friend of mine invited me to watch 'something remarkable'. We sat down in front of his computer and as the magical moment neared, he got more and more excited. He typed a few lines and waited… And there it was, somebody from the other side of the world responded. At the same time, he showed me something called the internet, with its pages that opened at a snail's pace. Anyway, we stayed there most of the afternoon because he wanted me to show (again his words) "the wonders of a new way of communicating that will revolutionize the world, or at least the world of communication," realizing this was quite a remark to make. But he was not alone. A whole bunch of internet apostles prophesied the same message.

A few years earlier, during my extensive travels as a journalist through Asia and India in the eighties and early nineties you could sense a new *élan*. People were talking more and more about the Asian Age. Asia was going to challenge the economic supremacy of the West. Even in India, things started changing. India was suddenly called an *emerging economy*, one of the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), a future economic superpower. I decided to use my India-oriented expertise and start my business. India was "en vogue" but doing business in India and with Indians was quite difficult because of the exotic culture, a different way of doing business, the enormous diversity within the country, and their way of communicating that was strikingly different from the direct way of communicating the Dutch were used to. My business model was simple and clear: Bridging the culture gap. With Indian and other foreign companies coming to Europe, promising to do all kinds of IT work at minimal cost, the need to cooperate in an efficient way became more and more pressing.

Outsourcing became the new buzz word. New words followed: offshoring, global sourcing, and strategic sourcing to name a few. Companies should stick to their core business became the new mantra. Reducing cost became a top priority in a globalizing world with increasing competition. A lot of IT work could be done by others saving money in the mean time, that is, if everything went according to plan. But, quite often, things did not go according to plan. Working with foreigners was more complicated than expected. Overcoming the differences in culture and ways of communicating was quite a challenge.

So almost two decades later, here we are; working in an international environment has become a common practice. The question is: Is there a golden rule, a magic elixir for a smooth transition and cooperation? The answer is 'no'. But, some things can greatly increase the outcome. The magic words are *trust* and *bonding*. Building a relationship takes time. Just contracts won't do. Don't go for the quick fix but take your time to know your partner and build a long lasting relationship. A sincere and deep understanding of your partner's culture and their way of working is essential and too easily taken for granted. International experience helps but is only the start. To be a real global manage or professional, intercultural competence is a must. But we all know that it is hard to overcome ingrained ideas. Ideas about ourselves, our culture, our country, and how we relate to others, people

with different ethnicity, religion, or sub-culture. To become more open and overcome our resistance to change takes time, even for people with 'an open mind' and a positive attitude to change. And as it takes "two to tango", a real commitment is required from both sides, whether they are Dutch, Indian, or any other nationality. Cultural differences and hiccups in communication are still grossly underestimated. Still they are the main reason why the cooperation did not answer earlier expectations, especially if cost advantages were the main reason for offshoring in the first place. Although cost saving may not be the prime reason for offshoring anymore, cost is still an important criterion while evaluating offshoring. Decades of experience show that training your people properly will increase efficiency, will reduce cost, and increase your success rate.

Differences between Countries and Businesses: My Personal Experience

It is easy to come across (high profile) mergers between companies (like Time and AOL) that did not work out (and cost billions of dollars) because their business cultures were very different or because market conditions in a globalizing, hyper dynamic environment changed (too) rapidly. Now that sourcing relationships between outsourcers and vendors are becoming more intricate, high value and long-term effective collaboration between partners (like a merger) becomes even more essential for success.

I have been involved in international business and offshoring for more than two decades and quite often I am surprised by the lack of preparation when it comes to culture and communication. It is too easily taken for granted that a basic training about the country and the other company will do. Indians for example tend to think that originating from the most diverse country in the world makes them understand differences between countries and people more easily. Based on my experience with dozens of companies, I can assure you that this is not true. On the contrary, as the differences and lack of understanding become more profound, the ability to overcome them has become more of a problem than ever before. Why? There are three main reasons. Firstly, the astonishing growth of Indian IT vendors. Companies like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro have grown in little more than 10 years into IT behemoths of around 200,000 people and more. Keeping in mind that around 15 percent of their workforce leaves every year, tens of thousands of people have to be integrated within the company every year. A second reason is the socio-economic background of Indian IT workers. Many of them are from less privileged backgrounds than the IT workers of a decade ago. Their worldview is less international and their English, or Indo-English, is difficult to understand for anyone not familiar with rolling sounds, peculiar pronunciation, and the use of archaic or Indo-English words. A third important reason is their knowledge of India and how Indians relate to the rest of the world.

Indian education is very top down. To look at themselves or their country in a critical way is not encouraged. Most of them have only a slight understanding about what it is to be an Indian, and how Indians relate to the rest of the world. Although most IT companies do prepare their workers to work abroad and introduce them to the specific culture(s) of their host countries, their local knowledge is usually quite insufficient to say the least. On the other hand, most of the Dutch IT workers have very little experience working in an international environment let alone working with Indians. Connecting both worlds is quite a challenge, particularly aggravated by the organizational changes that usually

accompany outsourcing.

About Cultures and Communication

Probably the most important writer about cultures is Geert Hofstede. His *Dimensions of Culture* became iconic criteria upon which to differentiate cultures. Some important dimensions are:

1. Power Distance: In Hofstede's words, "it is the degree in which the less powerful members of an organization accept that power is distributed unequally." Usually, there is direct correlation between the distribution of power in society at large and companies. Countries with less hierarchy and power distance promote a critical attitude. They like people to speak out, be open, and critical as opposed to those countries where the boss is still the boss and where people should listen and obey rather than criticize and take initiative.

2. Individualism versus collectivism: Northern Europe and the Anglo Saxon world stand out for individualism while most countries in catholic, southern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia (so the great majority of the world) are much more collectivistic and traditional societies where hierarchy, respect, and authority are key. So businesses are usually organized along these lines with two important restrictions. Some sectors like IT, while operating in an international environment, are less traditional and more willing to incorporate international or western values. However, everyday experience shows that it is very difficult to change the mindset and attitude of people who have grown up in a traditional society.

3. Uncertainty avoidance: Most westerners have been raised in a world where we are taken care of "from the cradle to the grave". Things are planned and life seems to be "in control". Indians, on the contrary, are used to living in more uncertain surroundings. This has a direct effect on the planning and implementation of projects. Quite often, westerners complain of losing "oversight".

4. Long versus short time orientation: Are we in for the short-fix or willing to build a long term relationship?

Finally, a very useful way of looking at cultures is whether they are so-called *High Context* or *Low Context cultures*. Edward and Mildred Hall found out that cultural differences lead to different ways of communication. In high context cultures, people learn from infancy to adjust the things they say according to the situation and depending on the authority of the one they speak to. In general, they say what somebody likes to hear. Positive opinions are communicated directly, negative opinions on the other hand are not communicated directly. This is one of the reasons why people do not easily use the word NO. A so-called negative reply (no, not in time, negative feedback, etc.) is not directly communicated but has to be "read" between the lines. Most countries in the world are high context. The Netherlands is a low context country. People say what they mean. The Dutch have a reputation of being very direct.

What to do?

Take your time to prepare people. Quite often, organizations that outsource and offshore are in a

process of rapid change. Most people prefer *status quo*. Especially in IT, workers are pretty conservative. So, getting management on board and making them culturally competent is a priority. The managers of both the local firm and for example, the Indian IT vendor should be trained properly first, because they have to lead. Make a priority list of possible issues in the new cooperation, analyze them, and start. Give a basic training first and a second training a few months later with all the issues that came up during the initial cooperation. Those who are considered inter culturally competent could act as intermediaries between the different cultures. Coaching the managers is advisable because issues will keep arising.

What is Important?

To become interculturally competent, some important traits needed are:

- **Adaptability**: Ability to adjust quickly to changing circumstances and situations
- **Cooperation**: Willingness to work with others
- **Curiosity and Learning:** Desire to find answers to questions like who, what, where, why, and how
- **Empathy**: Being aware of and being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others
- **Friendliness**: Ability to generate good feelings in relationships
- **Patience**: Willingness and ability to give others - and yourself - time to learn and adjust
- **Resilience**: Ability to keep going despite difficulties and setbacks
- **Self-Awareness**: Understanding one's own habitual ways of thinking and behaving, and their potential impact

To be able to relate to the other, a basic understanding and awareness of one's own culture, its values, and its basic assumptions is a must. Obtaining intercultural competence is a process that takes time. One learns by interacting. And, it is a good investment in oneself. By doing so, one not only gets a better understanding of the other but also of oneself and it will be helpful all over the world. It will make you a truly global manager and professional.

The most important stages in the process of intercultural competence are:

- **Denial**: We are not really aware of cultural differences
- **Defence**: We consider our culture as the most important one; other cultures are threatening or even inferior
- **Minimization**: Our norms and values are universal; we do things differently but we are basically the same
- **Acceptance**: We do recognize and accept cultural differences
- **Adaptation**: We are able to adjust our behavior
- **Intercultural competence**: You are able to move between cultures and act accordingly.

Once you arrive at this last stage, you will be able to work professionally with people from different backgrounds. Misunderstandings and conflicts may still arise (like in any relationship), but your efficiency and the efficiency of the team will greatly improve, and your work will be more satisfying and rewarding.

About Bert van Hijfte

My first trip to India goes quite a long way back. In 1987, I travelled to Delhi as a journalist to experience the country first-hand and come back with some stories on the Indian economy and the TATA Group in particular. Crisscrossing Rajasthan, visiting the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, The Lake Palace hotel in Udaipur, and finishing at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel in Mumbai – this was quite an introduction to the country. All this resulted in an extensive introduction for the Dutch into The Indian Hotels Company (IHCL) and its subsidiaries, collectively known as Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces.

From then on many more visits and publications followed for, among others, De Volkskrant, Het Parool, and several weeklies and travel magazines. Studying the country, I soon realized that more could be done to promote this complex and fascinating country and ´sell´ it in The Netherlands. Reform of the economy made it clear that India was an economic power in the making that would make its presence felt in the 21st century.

In 1997 I started **C Consultancy**, The Netherlands' premier consultancy firm on the effects of globalization (and Asia and India in particular) with special attention to culture and intercultural communication. For public and private organizations in The Netherlands and the EU that are interested in doing business in India, **C Consultancy** offers expert advice, training and coaching. For Asian and Indian companies in particular, we offer training and coaching on doing business in The Netherlands and the EU, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication.

Chapter 2 - Global Etiquette - Cultural Clues, Dos, and Taboos

By: Gayle Cotton

Cultural etiquette, politeness, and good manners are passed down through societies from generation to generation. Etiquette refers to the cultural guidelines for what is appropriate or inappropriate and polite or impolite. It gives a culture structure, integrity, grace, and finesse—all of which are uniquely adapted from one culture to another. Fortunately, simple business and social etiquette are often based on basic common sense. Although etiquette styles and fads may come and go, the fundamentals of global etiquette remain essentially the same.

The following tips on what to do and what to avoid will help you engage in successful global business and social interactions. They will help you avoid embarrassing faux pas and guide you towards establishing quality relationships and friendships.

Dos - Clues on What to Do

- Show respect: The most important of the global etiquette tips is to show respect for what is important to another person and his or her culture. Although cultural conditioning has deep roots, respect is universally understood and is an essential step in bridging the cultural gap.
- Show you care: Be proactive and learn about what's important to the cultures you visit or interact with. This will help you win friendships and develop business relationships.
- Strike a balance: Find the comfortable middle ground between your culture and that which you're visiting or working with. No one expects you to be just like him or her, nor would that be congruent. Be yourself and adapt to develop rapport in a way that works for all concerned.
- Know your geography: There is nothing more embarrassing than not knowing the exact location of the country you are visiting or the locality of its neighboring countries and surrounding areas!
- Mind your manners: What is polite in one culture may not be considered so in another, so know your manners for the countries you visit.
- Address people correctly: The practice of using first names, surnames, titles, university degrees, or religious designations varies from country to country, so learn what is appropriate.
- Clearly enunciate and speak slower: When communicating across linguistic borders, speak at least about 20 percent slower. There's no need to speak louder! Multilingualspeakers may be cross-translating, but they aren't deaf!
- Define acronyms, slangs, and jargons: Define, clarify, or eliminate any acronyms, abbreviations, slangs, and jargons that other cultures may not understand or even worse may understand them literally.

- Know the appropriate greetings: Greetings are as diverse as the cultures themselves. There are handshakes, kisses, hugs, and bows and they come in all shapes and sizes.

Taboos - Clues for What to Avoid

- Using rude hand gestures: Unless you are counting on your fingers, avoid any hand gestures that you think could be potentially offensive to other cultures so you don't unintentionally offend someone.
- Touching: Many cultures, including the United States, southern European, and some Latin American cultures, are comfortable with back pats or having an arm, elbow, or shoulder touched. However, this might be uncomfortable and inappropriate for people from other cultures.
- Appearing self-important: Although the US is known to prize self-confidence and an entrepreneurial spirit, some cultures including many in Europe and Asia prefer a more humble, group-oriented approach in their communication style.
- Asking personal questions: When in doubt, it's safest to wait to ask personal questions (about family, etc.) until someone poses these kind of questions to you first.
- Discussing religion: It's safest to avoid touching on the topic of religion, unless the other person brings it up first. There is always a chance that religious prejudice could be a problem.
- Discussing politics: It's advisable to keep politics, global affairs, and even a country's economic condition out of the conversation. Again, unless the other person brings it up first.
- Unintentionally causing embarrassment: People are embarrassed by different things in different cultures. Doing your research on the potentially embarrassing factors of specific cultures beforehand will help you avoid this.
- Showing the soles of your shoes: This may seem like a strange one, but showing the sole of your shoe is offensive in many cultures, including the Middle East and parts of Asia.
- Saying 'no': Many cultures, including the Asian and some Latin American cultures, consider saying 'no' directly to be impolite. If pushed for a firm 'no', they will become very uncomfortable.

When it comes to cultural etiquette, no one expects perfection. Awareness is the first step in bridging the cultural gap. A little advanced preparation and being observant may help you figure out most of what you need to know. If you enjoy working with or visiting other cultures, they are likely to enjoy the same with you!

About Gayle Cotton

Gayle Cotton is a National Emmy Award Winner and the author of the best-selling book 'SAY Anything to Anyone, Anywhere! 5 Keys to Successful Cross-Cultural Communication'. She is President of Circles Of Excellence for Corporate Education and a distinguished, highly sought after speaker. She has made keynote presentations for over 50 Fortune 500 companies, and has been a guest on NBC News, Good Morning America, PM Magazine, PM Northwest, Pacific Report, and PBS. Gayle was the first American to be accepted as a member of the 'European Marketing and Sales Experts' and is a Certified Expert in the 'Executive Foundation for International Communication'. She is a Global Resource for Young Presidents' Organization (YPO), World Presidents' Organization (WPO), Chief Executives Organization (CEO), and Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO).

An internationally recognized authority on cross-cultural communication, Gayle travels worldwide educating, entertaining, and inspiring others with her fresh and unique approach. Giving new meaning to the concept of creativity and productivity, she is on the leading edge of business communication. She offers customized keynote presentations and training or coaching on the topics of Cross-Cultural Communication, Customer Service, Diversity, Interpersonal Communication, Management & Leadership, Presentation Skills, Sales & Negotiations, Stress Management, Team Building, and Time Management. For more information, please visit www.GayleCotton.com

Gayle's Highlights:

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Author of 'SAY Anything to Anyone, Anywhere! 5 Keys to Cross-cultural Communication'

Founder and President of Circles Of Excellence - Dallas, TX, and Geneva, Switzerland

First American to be accepted as a member of the 'European Marketing and Sales Experts'

A Certified Expert in the 'Executive Foundation For International Communication'

A Professional Speaker with the National Speakers Association and Global Speakers Federation A Certified Executive Coach with the International Coach Foundation

Chapter 3 - Cultural aspects of international business

By: Rajiv Mathew

The world economy has gone global. Even the most modest businesses need to interact via emails or telephone with business people around the globe. Although conducting business in one's native country, India in our case, may not pose too many issues, when the business goes global and interaction extends to global clients, the scenario changes completely.

For a software services business like ours to be a global success, in order to close deals with international clients and make global contacts, it is very important to have a basic understanding of the culture where one is about to conduct business in or with. Remember that there is no such thing as a globally accepted code of conduct or a set of valid business etiquette guidelines which can be adhered to. Each country has its own unique culture and unwritten codes of conduct. Thus, it is very important to do your homework, before stepping into an alien land and hope to do some real business from these interactions!

Over the past few years, in my role as a marketing manager for software services firms, I have travelled a fair bit. I've noticed that the major business hubs around the globe follow different traditions when it comes to conducting business. Some of these may seem petty whereas some are really vital to the success of a business proposal and need to be strictly followed. Let me elucidate with some of my own experiences, on how business is conducted in various countries all over the world, the common mistakes an Indian businessman can make while travelling to those countries, and how these blunders can be avoided.

Middle East

The Middle East market comes with a lot of stereotypes and myths. Though some of these stereotypes may not exist today, some are still very much prevalent. Thus it is highly beneficial to get a clear understanding of business culture, etiquette, protocols, and negotiation techniques followed in this part of the world to reduce communication and stereotypical barriers.

A golden rule is to avoid conducting business in the Middle East in the holy month of Ramadan and during their two major festivals, Eid-Al Fitr and Eid-Al Daha. During this time, their daily routine and business meets take a backseat and majority of the people are absorbed in fasting, offering prayers, and later celebrating and engaging in festivities. Clearly, planning a business endeavor during this time is most likely to result in delay or failure. I had once inadvertently made a trip to the Middle East during this time and business was really dull. Hence the learning helped me understand a lot better about the way the market functions.

While conducting business in the Middle East, the 'handshake' is crucial. Handshakes can last a long time! Etiquette suggests that one waits for the other person to withdraw their hand before doing the same. Always use the right hand. Using the left hand can offend the host as it is considered unclean. Holding hands among men is common and it is not surprising if someone holds your hand while leading the way. Also Arabs prefer using the first name while addressing people.

The gender gap still exists in the Arab culture and men and women have well-defined roles. Free interaction between people of two genders is still frowned upon in certain areas. Avoid prolonged eye contact and touch when interacting with Arab women. Very often, women may not be introduced when in the presence of males; so, it is very important to take subtle hints in such situations.

Since the Arabs do not differentiate between personal and professional life, business relationship should be built upon a foundation of mutual friendship and trust. Initial business meetings are basically for building relationships and 'getting to know' the person you are conducting business with.

Business decisions are made slowly and putting too much pressure may prove to be counter-productive in this part of the world!

South East Asia

The far-east countries may be different from each other yet they have various common traits and thus can be classified as a single whole. I've spent significant time in the Singapore market and was able to grasp some of the nuances of the South East Asian market, since Singapore is a melting pot of Asian cultures.

Business cards in these countries are considered as a very extension of the person's professional image and should be handled with utmost care. The cards are to be exchanged with both hands simultaneously and this is not as easy as it sounds. The trick is to hold the card by the top corners/part with the name facing the receiver. The counterpart's card must be received with the left hand when both cards 'meet'. The card should not be put away instantly. It should be held in the hands for sometime or be kept on the table if a meeting is going on, before putting it in the pocket.

Respect matters a lot in this part of the world. Bear in mind that one should never do anything that causes their host to lose face in their country. If you are facing any issues with the host or are not happy with something, the correct way of approach will be to have a personal interaction with them in private and discuss the problem at hand very politely. Politeness must be maintained even in the most stressful situations. Secondly, in case there are chances to close a deal, it is extremely beneficial to meet your clients face-to-face, keeping in mind that the meetings will not be short and may extend to late nights. You may end up drinking with them late into the night, although if this meeting is a success then most likely the business deal will be too!

Also, hierarchy plays a very important role. Asians will not be interested in important discussions with low ranking members of a company. It is important to engage the CEO or MD of your company with them if you want the talks to go any further. Since my business card mentioned my designation as 'Head of Marketing', I was able to get an audience with many C-level people in the Singapore market. Connections are very important and direct contact with the company in search of a business opportunity might not always work.

Asians usually consider it a privilege to pay the bill and the head of the table (usually the boss of the company) takes the tab. It is considered rude if you insist on paying. Rather, they should be allowed to pay, and then be thanked profusely for the gesture.

Australia

Australians are most often warm, friendly, open, and perhaps have a much less formal approach to business interactions than most of their international counterparts. They are also very direct and do not require the buildup of any personal relation or rapport for business purposes. Good humor is always acceptable, even under very serious circumstances. So, people with a good sense of humor often manage to strike a chord with the Australians in business.

Punctuality is important in the Australian culture. Handshakes upon meetings are firm and brief and are exchanged at the end of the meetings too. Debate and open discussion are encouraged in business meetings and Australians are very receptive to new ideas and opinions. Although the meetings are generally relaxed, the discussion is taken very seriously. It should be kept in mind that one should not come across as self-important and smug in front of their Australian clients as they are a down-to-earth bunch and do not take such behavior in good light.

Australians give little importance to emotions when it comes to business and so every presentation should be well supported by facts and figures. They are not into negotiations and so the initial offer should have a very low margin for negotiation. Also, in most cases, the decision-making is concentrated at the top of the company.

Japan

Japanese business etiquette is very unique and one of the most searched for keywords on the internet. A striking difference is the formality with which the Japanese proceed with their business meetings. Exchanging of the business card is almost ritualistic in the first meeting. A useful tip is to carry at least 100 business cards for a one-week business trip and more for a longer duration.A Japanese business card must be accepted with respect, using both hands while saying 'Thank you' or '[Hajimemashite](#)'.

The Japanese business customs may come across as similar to the South East Asian countries. However, a major difference is the seriousness with which every ideal is followed. When conducting business in Japan, a successful relationship is based on sincerity, compatibility, and trustworthiness. A foundation of trust is essential and they should be assured that you are interested in the well-being of the company and not just in financial gain.

Decisions are rarely made in a meeting. The Japanese give a lot of attention to detail. So a lot of questions are asked in meetings and one should be ready to answer them with patience.

Gifts are always appreciated and it is a good idea to present some souvenirs to your clients as a token of goodwill. You are likely to get a gift too, but it is good practice to not open it in front of the host. Social get-togethers after a meeting are also common and this is done specifically to get to know each other well. The Japanese are fond of alcohol and if you enjoy your drink, you will benefit a lot from this habit!

The Japanese have a hard time saying 'No', so expect them to beat around the bush. Try to read

between the lines and understand from their body language whether their response is positive or negative.

Europe

Europe ranges from the cold countries of Norway and Sweden in the North to the warm Mediterranean countries of Italy and Greece. Some customs vary from one region to another while others are shared across all topographies.

Handshakes are the standard way of greeting in all European countries. The European handshake, however, is usually exchanged before and after every meeting. Handshakes are usually firm and brief except in France where a lighter grasp is preferred.

People in Europe do not prefer to be called by their first names immediately and titles, especially academic ones, are always used.

Host gifts are generally not accepted anywhere in Europe and in Great Britain. It is an absolute no. Dinner in Europe is usually for social entertainment and it is rude to refuse dinner invitations. Depending on the country, your spouse may also be invited. Europeans don't do business breakfasts. In Austria, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Finland, and Spain, talking business over lunch is not a violation of etiquette. In the Czech Republic, Italy, and Greece, on the other hand, business is not discussed over lunch unless your host initiates it.

USA

Shaking hands firmly and making eye contact are important parts of greeting business contacts in America. Religion, politics, and personal information (such as health or relationship issues) should never be discussed as these issues are highly sensitive to Americans. Gift-giving is not customary in this part of the world too. The use of first names without any titles is the usual way of addressing people. Americans view the business card as a source of future information and tend to exchange cards casually. There is no set ritual for exchanging business cards.

Men and women in the workplace are socially equal, and you should always treat everyone in a meeting as equal, regardless of their gender, race, sexual identification, or age.

Punctuality is of utmost importance to Americans, and someone from India may find it a tad bit too overwhelming. In India, we are used to IST (Indian Stretchable Time) and often end up blaming the traffic as an excuse for arriving late. Being "on time" in business situations generally means being about five minutes early. Five minutes late is acceptable with a brief apology. In case you are late by 10-15 minutes, then it's a good idea to call and apologize.

Meetings are generally informal and relaxed in manner, but serious in content. Americans are impressed by numbers. Using statistics to support your opinions is likely to give you more success in the meeting. The goal of most negotiations in the United States is to arrive at a signed contract. Long-term relationships and benefits may not be the main objective. The immediate deal may be the only important issue. As 'time is money' to Americans, they do not waste time in trying to build long lasting

relationships.

In my first job at Oracle, I sold software on the phone to the North American market. Americans are used to buying and selling stuff on the phone and don't mind buying stuff from a stranger, if the product or service seems to fit their requirements. Hence, inside sales works best in the American market where customers are more open to sales on the phone.

Americans freely discuss business over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Some socializing may start off the meal, but often the conversation will revolve around business. In a business setting, the person extending the invitation to a meal pays for it.

Additional Tips:

- Verbal gestures such as 'Please" and "Thank You" are very important in the United States. Americans expect these kinds of words and phrases in daily interactions.
- Smoking is highly unpopular in the United States. Never smoke without taking permission from everyone present around you.
- It is considered rude to stare, ask questions, or otherwise bring attention to someone's disability.

As you travel to multiple countries, it can be slightly intimidating to keep in mind so many norms and customs. However, for global success, it is imperative to know your clients and competitors really well. Remember that there is no shortage of competent and reliable people in the business world and good manners can make a difference and give you that edge over your counter parts!

About Rajiv Mathew

Rajiv Mathew is the head of Marketing at Compassites Software. He is a hands-on technology marketing & communications professional with proven expertise in multiple facets of the marketing spectrum. He loves branding and has been in love with it from school days!

Over the years, he has worked on numerous marketing initiatives including marketing communications, online marketing, recruitment marketing, internal communications, public relations, events, collateral design, sales enablement, social media strategy & brand management. Prior to joining Compassites he worked at ThoughtWorksInc as a marketing & communications specialist, where he was exposed to many aspects of technology marketing. Prior to that, he was a sales consultant at Oracle, where he sold database products into the North America market.

Chapter 4 - Empathy to Bridge Cultural Differences

By: Hugo Messer

What you are going to read in this article may sound like Chinese to many technologists. And that's exactly the challenge I want to discuss. Empathy is not a common trait among engineers. If you think about a typical engineer, you probably visualize someone who's very adept at talking to computers as opposed to talking to human beings, right? The stereotype you visualize talks for hours about his 'stuff', while you had lost him within the first few minutes and he doesn't seem particularly concerned with your understanding.

So, how do technologists collaborate with other technologists, while they are separated by time, distance, language, and above all, by culture? In my experience, the key is 'empathy'. The typical technologist is not the person you'd ascribe empathy to. As this is only a stereotype, the people most suitable to collaborate with a remote team are technologists that do have empathy. To a certain level, empathy can also be stimulated.

I like the following definition of empathy the best:

'Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives'

In the context of cross-culture collaboration, empathy leads us to accept (cultural) differences. Once we have accepted the differences, we can organize ourselves to bridge the differences.

In practical terms, empathy can be stimulated at four levels:

- At the team level: building true collaboration based on relationships
- At the company level: real understanding of company cultures
- At the product level: deep understanding of why the product exists
- At the intercultural level: understanding of the impact of culture on individual behavior

Empathy at the Team Level

If we view the world in black and white, we could say that one way to organize work is through a factory or production line approach. People are like machines: you throw in an order and they produce your stuff. On the other extreme, we could visualize a group of creative people in a room, talking freely, brainstorming, and (possibly) producing 'stuff'.

If teams are globally distributed, people are inclined to have a factory view of organizing work. Onshore, we talk to clients, brainstorm about the features that need to be built, specify everything, and then send it to the 'factory'. The factory tells us when it'll be ready and how much it will cost and hopefully the factory delivers on its promises. No empathy.

To create a team, the approach has to be more towards the other view. The people offshore should be seen as individuals with their own life story. They function in a particular culture, which influences their way of thinking and their behavior. They operate within the culture of their company and even develop a sub-culture within their team. For the people offshore, it looks the same: there's a culture,

company, and team onshore, which they need to empathize with.

Because we often focus on the 'hard' things (KPIs, SLAs, and deadlines), we overlook the soft side. To create a valuable collaboration, the empathy within the distributed teams has to be stimulated. But how do you go about this when people are separated?

First of all, you can make a good start by changing the perspective as described above. From there, it's what you would do in a local team plus some more. When you try to build relationships locally, you talk. You interact in order to get to know the other person. And in essence, that's what is needed with the remote people too. Scrum provides many feedback loops that create more talk time among people, which is a good start. Maybe you can even schedule 'free talk time' in which you discuss life instead of projects. But the most important thing is to meet regularly in person. Spend some time in the other country, join their lives, visit their families, and let them show you their world. And do the same when they come (yes even while your European mindset tells you that you want to spend your weekend with your own family, invite them home and spend time together!).

Empathy at the Company Level

Every company has a set of core values (even if they haven't been explicitly described in words). The people within the company attract or hire other people that share their values. The company also has a reason why it has been created, a purpose to fulfill, and a vision of where it wants to go. For two companies to form a true relationship, it's important that the individuals inside the collaboration know each other's values, mission, and vision. Especially the values, since that's a driver for behavior.

It's worth spending time, especially in the beginning, to explore the core values. This can be in the form of a document sent back and forth, but more effective is a session in which the values are discussed. What does it mean for us? What are some examples where people did or did not live up to our values? How did a partner (not) live up to a value?

Empathy at the Product Level

This may sound strange, how can you empathize with a product? The main challenge I see in remote collaboration is this: people offshore really have no clue why on earth people would use the product they're working with. And even worse, often they don't even really care, because what they are supposed to do is 'produce functionality'.

For the onshore team, this empathizing is usually automatic. People spend time in the office. The office is filled with product samples, people talk about the product all day, they brainstorm at the coffee machine, and talk to clients visiting their office. The product is what actually brought the people together; it's part of their life. The offshore team however, misses all of this.

The challenge is to stimulate the interest of the offshore team for the product they are building. While a demonstration of the product at the outset of the collaboration is important, it's often not enough. The best way to go about this is to get the team onshore in the initial weeks. Let them 'feel' the product and talk to real users face to face. Show them how the product is used in people's daily lives. In some cases,

similar products don't exist in the offshore location, which makes it even harder to understand. While explaining the use of the product, try to put it into the perspective of the other country – do they have similar applications, does the underlying business look the same? Then schedule regular product vision meetings in which you explain the roadmap, discuss feedback from customers, and share the vision for the project. Ideally, this vision meeting is part of every sprint planning, so that the offshore team is aware of the changes in direction that are made (subconsciously) onshore.

A few years back, we built a software team for a company in Germany. Their software product was a digital asset management tool. This software is used by marketing departments to publish all their different content into various channels (both offline and online). For me, it's hard to grasp how the specific use of this software would look like for a customer. The customer sent a representative to our Indian office to give a demonstration of the software, and I was also attending. It took him about half an hour to show the main functionalities. My brain automatically goes to users and business model, but even I couldn't understand it. While the programmers said they understood the software, they probably meant the technical logic of it, but not the business logic. Where's the money? Why do people use it? What people use it? What companies? What's the benefit? If the software wasn't there, how did their lives look? The hard part was that the demo was given by a technologist. So we agreed that we'd have another demo a week later from the 'commercial guys'. But due to time pressure (functionalities had to get done!) this never happened.

The problem with the above case is typical: a company builds a remote team to speed up development. Because everything is urgent, there is not enough time to go into the details of business and technical logic (the latter programmers will figure out over time by themselves but not the former). There's even no time to visit each other (let us first get this to work, if it works, we'll invest in trips). Because the team doesn't fully grasp how functionalities are supposed to be used, they can't visualize their impact on the complete software. So they build the functionalities and deliver without testing or thinking about the consequences. This results in bugs or things missing. The onshore team wonders, "Can't these guys think beyond the task they're assigned"? And the offshore team wonders, "How am I supposed to know if those guys don't explain me what we're building here"?

So how do you stimulate empathy for your products? First, it's best to build a team of engineers that have curiosity in their DNA. People who really want to understand what they're building, who want to be part of a 'cool product' with an impact on the world, people who develop software with a love for the users of the software. Second, make a knowledge transfer plan. Plan the trips (in the first month and then each 6-12 months), the product demo (1-2 days at the start), a commercial demo (a day at the start), some talks with users (every 1-2 months), and vision meetings (every 2 weeks or as part of sprint planning). Third, give open feedback sessions about the way they learn about your products; are you happy with their level of (technical and business) product knowledge? Keep the discussion going and remember that often when people seem to be forgetting the impact of what they've programmed, it's not because they are stupid or not proactive, but because they don't understand why they are doing (at least… in most cases!).

Empathy at the Cultural Level

This is where the cultural trainers come in. I must admit that I never attended any cultural training myself. I did read some books about it, but not many. [A recent book I read is from Geert Hofstede](). My inclination is to say that too much studying of culture makes a person think a lot about culture. Many things can then get attributed to cultural differences. If you see the differences, then they exist and what you focus on, grows.

This is not to say that you shouldn't read books or get a training. I certainly think that if you work with a team in India, it's valuable to get trained by someone who's specialized in Indian culture (or the differences between your culture and India). But just don't overdo it. At the end of the day, we're all human beings and while culture has an impact, it's not the only thing. That's also the reason I put empathy on the cultural level last in this article. Differences exist on other levels as well and if we are not conscious, we may attribute all of them to culture.

Having said that, I also experienced that the best training is to live in the country for a while. When I set up our Indian office, I took my family with me. Everybody told me I was nuts to take my 10-month old twins to India and my wife had never set foot on Indian soil. But this experience taught me more than any training could ever teach me.

There are people who love and embrace cultural differences and there are people who don't. This is also why some Dutch go to the Spanish coast: they can meet up with fellow Dutch, eat french fries in the snack bar, and sing Dutch songs in the evenings. Others go to the Himalayas.

Recently, I spoke to a colleague who had just visited India. When I called him, I asked him how the trip had been. He told me that he went there with a group of Danish people and immediately started telling me how funny it is that Danes and Dutch are so different, while also similar. That's a person who loves cultural differences and loves engaging with 'strangers'.

Other people prefer to have a quiet life. They want to do their job and certainly don't want to spend time on understanding the 'stranger'.

It's best to have many people in the offshore-onshore team who are open minded about 'strangers'. Such people accept the differences and become intrigued by it: why does this person behave in this way and why do I expect something else? Is that because of my cultural imprint? From that point onwards, they'll start to explore and discuss the behavior. And by doing that, they open the way to organize around the differences and create mutual understanding.

So the solution is simple: get people in your team who embrace differences. Then give them resources to spend time abroad and to engage cultural trainers.

Conclusion

Empathy is the key to bridging cultural differences. It's the key to making global collaboration work. While most companies focus on hard factors, contracts, cv's, kpi's, governance instruments, they forget the soft factors. By stimulating empathy on the team level, the team starts operating as 'one' and people see each other as colleagues. On the company level, empathy enables all people involved to understand

what drives the people in each company, what they consider important. On the product level, empathy enables everyone to have a thorough understanding of the product's 'why'. And at the cultural level, empathy leads us to understand and accept the differences, so we can find ways to organize 'around' the differences.

About Hugo Messer

Hugo Messer has been building and managing teams around the world since 2005. His passion is to enable people that are spread across cultures, geographies, and time zones to collaborate. Whether it's offshoring or nearshoring, he knows what it takes to make a global collaboration work.

To know more about Hugo, check out his website http://www.hugomesser.com. You can also read the blog or watch videos at youtube

About Bridge Global IT Staffing

Bridge Global IT Staffing offers western software companies an opportunity to work with IT talents from their offices in India and Ukraine. The personal support, offered from the European offices in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Denmark, makes it easier for clients to manage their colleagues from a distance. Since there is both an offshore and a nearshore office, chances are high that Bridge has the talented IT employee you are looking for. If not, the perfect candidate will be found for you.

Website: http://www.bridge-outsourcing.nl

Chapter 5 - Doing Business with Former Soviet Countries - Cultural aspects and risks

By: Nataly Veremeeva

The topic on differences between cultures is often unjustly ignored and underestimated. And indeed, theory often states that without regard to nationality or social background, if you are a professional, you will do your job well no matter what the conditions are. This view is quite popular and definitely has its justification. However, this derives from a time when mankind, absolutely charmed by the easiness of production lines and machines, depicted humans too as well-functioning machines! It is a big and dangerous mistake. True, we are able to teach people to perform certain functions and we even succeed if the functions are easy enough, as in the above mentioned production line for instance. However, the more complex and intellectually challenging the tasks become, the more the so-called mysterious "human factor" comes into play. No doubt, we are much more complex than machines. We are determined by our physiology and psychology, consciousness and sub-consciousness; we make decisions independently and, at the same time, are influenced by factors surrounding us. And these peculiarities imply both challenges and advantages, depending on if and how we use our potential. In fact, this human potential can be compared to a sharp knife – it can be an instrument to kill or an instrument to bring joy through an easy and tasty cooking experience. In the modern epoch of individualization, we are becoming more and more aware of this human complexity. As a result of this awareness, our HR strategies offer special conditions for each member of the organization; we learn about motivation and try to work out the best approach in meeting every employee's individual requirements. Another related factor which we start to pay more attention to in a globalized company is the factor of cultures – the subtle, sometimes not noticeable, but bearing big risks, and also fewer possibilities.

Let us then speak about culture. I don't want to sound theoretical, so instead of general words and assumptions I decided to share my personal experience, which could be interesting from two aspects. First - I was born in this biggest empire, called the Soviet Union, and then I found myself in Ukraine. And second, I communicate extensively with western partners, so I am able to compare and identify the points where we differ. So in this chapter, I will share my personal experience of how it feels to be Ukrainian and work with international companies. By doing so, I will mainly point out the hidden risks of a cooperation to raise your awareness for these specific cultural differences. Surely there are a lot of advantages, but let us speak about risks this time.

I was born in the Soviet Union and then found myself in Ukraine in 1991, after the dissolution. My childhood was characterized by a lot of changes within the society. It was a time when former enemies, western countries about which we knew nothing, became friends, or rather privileged people who had everything which we lacked. No wonder, until I started my career in a company that was selling IT development services to the West, all Westerners had been some sort of god to me – cleverer, wealthier, and happier than I was. I had my dignity though, and fought for shaping our image in a positive way, explaining to every interested person about our advantages and strengths. However, this

idealistic perception of every foreigner being rich and clever was still in everyone's mind. This was also the time when our own comedians started to mock the Soviet culture and traditions. People were disappointed and evidently wanted to copy the western type of living, as it had proved to be more successful than the one we used to have in the Soviet Union. Of course, this was not just my personal perception. A lot of people here had felt the same way. And it definitely had affected the way we worked. I treated every European as a rich and clever lock, for which we only needed to find the right key in order to live happily ever after. Only later, the understanding of equality of our self-value and dignity had developed. I realized that we have a huge potential and that our values did not lie in agreeing to everything, but in arguing and finding the best solution together.

During these 20 years, this mindset has been very common in the IT field, especially while conducting business with western companies. First, we blindly followed and only said "Yes, Master"; then we got deeper into the business, learned the rules and became equal players (or were rather in the process of becoming one) whose opinions are also taken into account. This process has not finished yet. Moreover, there are people who even went further, whereas some are still at the initial point. Right now, (May 2014) we seem to have the final fight with this Soviet past. We overcame stereotypes and restructured our society. And the fact that Ukraine is considered to be a mainstream outsourcing location proves that we are going in the right direction.

Nevertheless, if you are considering working with Ukrainian companies (and chances are high that you may be), you need to take this factor into account. This is how it works: you hire developers and tell them what to do. In my experience, they will do what you tell them, but in their minds, sometimes, they are not aware of your business objectives and visions. The reason for this is that people just do not have a clear understanding of crucial words like ROI, and might assume that your budget is unlimited, as you are considered to be a rich westerner. They also think that if you have asked for a task to be done, you definitely know better. They do not question your actions, do not argue, and are solely concerned about accomplishing tasks, and thereby getting money from you. Obviously, I am describing the worst case, but it all seems to have started from there.

In the Soviet Union, the value of entrepreneurship did not exist at all. It is hard to understand, but for most people, their motivation did not result from the desire to be successful. Some of them just did their jobs to get money from the State, no matter how successful they were in what they did. Others tried to succeed in political careers which gave them the chance to gain extra economical benefits, provided they were able to figure out the direction the ruling party was following and join that direction. Consequently, the result was absence of initiative, entrepreneurship, and understanding of how business works. Only 20 years ago, we started to grow this notion of money-making and understand the challenges in the market. We have gradually come to an understanding about business objectives, and that money is a limited resource not only in Ukraine but also in other countries. Furthermore, we have learned that our clients are vulnerable and they do not start a project because they want to give us money, but because they intend to generate more money both for themselves, their employees, and us for example.

So you need to make sure that the company you start working with has already understood these

principles, and is mature enough to collaborate on an international level. In case they still lack this mentality and you still want to work with them, a steep learning curve is necessary.

First of all, share your plans and strategy with your remote team. Describe your idea, reasons for starting this collaboration, and be transparent about your budget and plans. Describe your expectations. Always be open and honest. The main aim here is to make them realize that you are a human being and to remove that idealistic image of a foreigner. Do not be afraid of losing the status – you still keep your leading position as openness is valued as a good sign of maturity. If you manage to show that you are just as human as anyone else, they most likely will be motivated to work with you as one team, and will not treat you as some machine-like authority that just pays them some money.

Another thing that you can do is to invite them for a short trip to your location to work with your local team. This could be a life-changing experience. Ukrainian society is perceived to be very conservative with a lot of people who have never gone anywhere out of the country. Or if they go to some places, most commonly, they look for tourist places in Turkey, for instance. This, however, does not widen their horizon, as they still stick to their closed society and do not travel in the true sense of the word. Hence, they just do not know how it feels to live in a different culture. Give them such an opportunity if you can. Another advice is regarding communication skills: if you happen to know a foreigner in their local city who, for example, teaches English, you should arrange some lessons with the tutor once or twice a week. Not only will your team's English speaking skills be improved but also their way of looking at things can be influenced by this experience.

One more thing that is different and that definitely needs some adjustment is the lax leave day policy. 70 years of total social security provided by the Soviet Union has influenced how we conduct business. Back then, you could take sick leaves and still get your salary, as you get paid by the State and not from some independent business. This resulted in the convention that if you are a little bit ill, you could take a sick leave and enjoy an extra vacation. Nowadays, at this point, one must draw the line. People definitely need to have rest and time to cure themselves; otherwise they will not work effectively enough. But when they start taking leave days due to the light sneezing, you need to look closer at it and the ways how you can adjust your motivation techniques. The assumption that one can be lazy and relaxed because some higher forces will do the job somehow is a typical example of our people not always being able to take responsibilities, which, in my understanding, comes from Soviet Union's collective philosophy. You may be lucky to meet enthusiastic, active employees, who are already mature enough, but still this unwillingness to take responsibility and absence of proactive approach is one of the reasons for the economic stagnation in Ukraine. A country such as Ukraine, with all its potential and huge resources, is still not prosperous. Evidently, this does not change, since prosperity starts in our heads, goes hand in hand with our attitude, and does not happen just because of external circumstances. The reason why we have not succeeded in changing the situation yet is simple and at the same time alarming. We have not yet adjusted and learned to do it right. However, there is a high chance that you are the person who knows how it works, or you employ the company or employ people, who already have this knowledge. Western traditions of effective management regarding the conditions of a capitalistic economy can make your business a success on a global level. Share all these

insights with your remote team and introduce them to certain techniques, principles, values, and approaches. Help them understand that taking the initiative, being proactive, being structured, and punctual are essential key factors for the daily business. Use your management knowledge for guiding your team. Ukrainians are smart, they can look back on a great tradition of fundamental education, they have a European mentality and location, and they are open to new impulses and ways of doing business since a better life is their drive. So – make yourself familiar with the risks, work out the best way to deal with them, and get all the benefits from it.

Here, I have described the hidden risks of collaborating with Ukrainian remote teams only. Definitely, I can also write about how wonderful and full of advantages it is to do business here. It is true that there are a lot of pluses. Ukrainians can be very hard working, loyal, very often motivated by technology, and can really be very high-level specialists. They tend to be independent, proud of their identity and tolerant to other cultures, creative, able to think together with you, and have their own point of view and defend it. These are the advantages of our culture and clues. Still, there is also this layer from the past, which we are fighting with, bearing the hidden risks which people prefer not to talk about.

I hope with these authentic insights without any euphemisms, you now know how to turn your collaboration into a success.

About Nataly Veremeeva

Nataly Veremeeva is an active individual with passion for IT and making the world a better, closer, and friendlier place. Her degrees and experiences cover international management as well as language and culture. IT outsourcing, with its mix of cultures, management challenges, and practically infinite possibilities for international collaboration, excites and inspires her. Having worked in IT outsourcing for more than 7 years (since 2005), Nataly knows the risks, problems, advantages, strengths, and weaknesses of outsourcing, and what it takes to make it a success. And she is happy to share them.

About Intercomputer Global Services

Intercomputer GS is a European software development team provider and system integrator with development offices in Germany and Ukraine. Intercomputer GS operates in:

- **Document Management Systems and Solutions**

  Working with big enterprises and SMEs, implementing ECM systems such as Documentum, SharePoint, Alfresco, and others, mostly for enterprises from the financial sector and industries.

- **ODC Centers**

  Creating software development teams on a range of technologies, such as SharePoint, Documentum, .NET, Java, C/C++, and embedded development mostly for software companies that wish to extend their capabilities and increase their competitiveness in a challenging market such as IT.

- **QA Lab**

  Testing our own and our clients' products to increase quality and profit.

  Intercomputer enjoys an excellent reputation since its start in 1999. It is a partner of EMC, Microsoft, ABBYY, Oracle, VMware, IBM, and Intel. It is ISO certified and has established good processes. The company has European and US clients on a wide range of services, providing them with European quality and Eastern European prices.

Chapter 6 - Cultural Differences or How I Managed to Learn to Work with Both Dutch and Indians Without Losing My Hair

By: Ged Roberts

I am sure we all have heard the joke "Heaven is where the police are British, the chefs French, the mechanics German, the lovers Italian, and it is all organized by the Swiss. Hell is where the police are German, the chefs British, the mechanics French, the lovers Swiss, and it is all organized by the Italians". Whether any of the above is true is irrelevant. It makes us all smile as we reflect on our own - or at least others' - national stereotype. Yet it is these presumptions we take with us when we engage with a new culture for the first time.Based on what we have watched on TV, or read on the internet, it takes only one tiny action to reaffirm our own preconceived thoughts and ideas.

I have been fortunate enough to spend most of my working life in international teams and environments. The differences between nationalities provided me with an enriching set of experiences that I can only recommend to everyone else.I am British and I have lived in The Netherlands for nearly 30 years and for the last 7 years I have worked for a major Indian consulting company.

So considering the Dutch and Indian cultures, what are the challenges and opportunities we come across while working within the culture of both these countries and nationalities? Let me say from the outset: People's cultures will not change and the ways and working of a group of people from the same country, is pretty much fixed.Our challenge here is not to change another person's culture but to understand it and thereby become effective in working within the respective system. Furthermore, let me emphasize that no one culture is better than another. They are what they are, neither good nor bad, but interesting in all their variants.

This article is written from the perspective of Dutch clients and Indian service providers working in the IT industry; it would be very interesting to see a reversal of these roles and whether these key characteristics are as pronounced.

The table below gives a nice overview of the characteristics of both nationalities:

India	The Netherlands
People are interdependent	People are independent
Identity through one's community	Identity through individual performance
Status based on position	Status based on personal qualities
Collectivism	Individualism
Relationship-oriented	Task-oriented
People are unequal	People are more or less equal
Centralization	Decentralization
Hierarchical decision making	Consensual decision making
Avoid open conflict or compliments in a group to maintain harmony and honor	Sort out conflicts through result-oriented criticism, discussion, and truth
Tradition is important	The future is important
Religion is a public affair	Religion is a private matter
Spirituality is important	Spirituality is irrelevant
Excellence is a '10'	Satisfactory is a '6'

In the next few paragraphs, I will highlight some of the more prominent differences.

(In-)Directness

The Dutch trend is to be blunt and direct. When things are bad, you are told about it clearly and unambiguously, in front of your boss, your team, or whoever happens to be in the meeting or room. Furthermore, feedback will be given by all people, senior and junior alike, as well as people who you thought were not even involved in this activity.This café culture in the Dutch is strong and they are keen to share it with you.Yet, as said above, the focus is not on criticism for criticism's sake, but to drive as quickly as possible to the task in hand and to establish areas of concern. In contrast, when first experiencing this phenomenon, Indian cultures (and others for that matter) find it very aggressive to the point of being extremely rude.People are taken aback, especially when opinions are quite freely given by the most junior of people.As a result, a lot of Indian associates clam up and the exact opposite of establishing the best approach is achieved. Consequently, a lot of ideas never come to the surface.Eventually, every non-Dutch person learns that this is not personal, it is just the way they are.

Decisions

Some of you may have heard of the *poldermodel*. This model stems from medieval times when the landowners, canal owners, and mill owners had to work together in order to prevent the lands from flooding and affecting all three parties.In this model, everyone has to agree on a course of action even though it may not be the optimum result for each of them personally.This drives compromise in order to achieve a mutually beneficial consensus. This model is an example of decision making within a Dutch organization. When taking major decisions, all stakeholders are consulted, all views are heard, compromises are made, and a common ground is found before the final decision is taken.I would call this horizontal decision making. This is in stark contrast to how Indian firms make their decisions. In an Indian company, the decision making is far more level and seniority-oriented, where project leads consult with program directors, thereafter relationship managers, and even unit heads if required.I would call this vertical decision making.

Both methods require time and coordination.My Indian colleagues cannot understand that if a senior Dutch colleague has made a principal agreement, the rest of the Dutch team do not immediately act on it. Conversely, our Dutch colleagues are always complaining that they never have access to the real decision maker.In essence, neither group is right or wrong. Perhaps a better term for both parties is to describe the contact point as decision facilitator.However, once everyone is aware of this decision making process, you can plan accordingly. It is possible to understand the stakeholders, their criteria for decision making, and then drive to resolution.I mentioned above that culture is what it is, it will not change, and I have found that understanding this single process and working within it has made the most significant impact on retaining my sanity.

Excellence is a '10', Satisfactory is a '6'

Understanding some of our differences goes beyond our work environment and can be clearly traced back to the way in which we are educated and the sort of expectations and standards that we, as students, were supposed to attain.

If you inspect the various levels within the Indian education system, you see astonishingly high levels of scores.Places at good schools are at a premium and students work exceptionally hard to attain the marks in order to have a chance of winning a good place. The top university entrance exams expect scores of 100% – and even a perfect score is no guarantee of a good place.

Contrast this with the Dutch educational marking system, a 6 is satisfactory and deemed a pass. In addition, high caliber students achieve a string of 8s and are amongst the very top in their class. A 10 is a rare occurrence. Furthermore, in The Netherlands, there are a few university places reserved for the elite students, whilst the rest of the students who pass their exams will enter into a lottery for the remaining academic places.

These two completely different views of what is acceptable performance then collide and crash into each other when customer feedback is given and received. Like all companies, we solicit feedback on a regular basis, analyze it, and form action plans to improve ourselves.However, there is nothing like the shock one experiences the first time the Dutch give feedback.Firstly, as mentioned, the areas of improvement are given directly and without any form of nuance; secondly, it is when a customer satisfaction or feedback rating is given for the first time that there is usually a gasp of astonishment.The result is that a lot of projects receive a "6"(satisfactory), maybe a "7" (good)if there has been exceptional supplier performance. The Indians say, "But I thought we had met all the objectives". The Dutch reply, "Yes and we are very satisfied. What's the problem?"In one relationship, we had even received a score of 3.4 / 5, which had disappointed everyone until we heard that we were supplier of the year. Context is everything!

Understanding how feedback is received is as important as how feedback is given. The purpose of feedback is to both recognize and reward, as well as to identify opportunity for improvement.Preparation and good expectation setting on the part of both parties helps understand the real message.

Getting to 'Yes'

When I first started working for an Indian company, I was given a very sound piece of advice.I was told the following: "Ged, there are three ways an Indian person will say "yes" when asked whether they can do something, and the response will mean one of the following:

- Yes, I can do that
- Yes, I can do that (it will take me nineteen hours per day but I can do that)
- Yes, I can do that (actually I can't do that, but you are the customer and I cannot say no to a customer).

If you wish to be successful in any relationship with an Indian company, your challenge is to understand which version of 'yes' you have just heard.

When we probe deeper, mainly into version #3 of 'yes', we find a number of cultural items at play.The first aspect is the extreme levels of customer focus and customer centricity which plays within the Indian psyche.Concepts of 'the customer is always right' and 'the customer pays our wages' (management just handle the money) are prevalent throughout the culture.

The second aspect is that there is an assumption that someone will always say 'yes'. Consequently, if you want the business, or you want to maintain the relationship, then saying 'yes' ensures that the relationship stays with you.Although there is the worry that the commitment is given without any thoughts to the consequences, this relentless level of customer focus has led to some quite amazing achievements. The Indian's unremitting drive to honor the obligation is breathtaking and far more often than not, the goals are reached.In reality, many times, the version that you hear is not version #3 or version #1, but version #2.

Making the Relationship Work

In the end, despite our differences, we have to make these relationships work. The approach is relatively straightforward and based on the principles of sound project management. By being aware of the differences, they help us to understand not just how the other person behaves but, perhaps more importantly, why the other person behaves that way.

At the planning stage of any engagement, consider the following: hold cultural workshops in which these differences are openly discussed; ensure executive alignment;establish one team - by which I mean that you must define a common set of goals and a common set of objectives which everyone signs up to; define the role of a so-called tandem, a mechanism where you have a client singlepoint of contact (SPOC) and a provider SPOC and they report jointly on their team's progress; define clear roles and responsibilities and enable virtual working – if there is an offshoring element to the project, this must be addressed.

Continuing with the theme of good project management, at the startup stage, ensure that the following are defined: establish a team identity; define the rules of the game and apply to all involved; ensure

joint reporting by the tandems; define the core KPIs; ensure that the service delivery process is complete from end-to-end; communication covers all aspects and do not be afraid to address differences.

On a regular basis, consider the following: actively re-evaluate the need for more cultural workshops; consistent executive review; management by common facts and metrics as well as ensuring *one version of the truth*; review communication for effectiveness and address differences.

Conclusion

In short, we are who we are, with all our subtleties, frailties, strengths, and weaknesses. Yet – I will reiterate what I had said at the beginning – this is what makes us all interesting.Our culture is pretty much ingrained within us; however, if we understand the differences we can embrace them, learn from them and, if we are really to be effective, leverage them and succeed.

Now, if we were to talk about the British, well …

About Ged Roberts

Ged Roberts is an IT honors graduate of North Staffordshire Polytechnic. After spending two years working in the UK, he moved to The Netherlands in 1985. During the last 30+ years, Ged has worked for a number of internationally focused companies managing and delivering software services across Europe, America and Asia Pacific. His experience encompasses both service providers and clients. Ged's knowledge spans diverse sectors such as downstream oil and gas operations, telecommunications providers in both fixed and mobile domains, retail credit management, and more recently, high tech services. Ged, who specializes in large scale operations and systems integration, is currently responsible for ensuring delivery excellence for a unit within a major Indian IT services company.

Chapter 7 - A Cross-Cultural Approach to Learning and Teaching in US and India: A Comparative Study

By: Jennifer Kumar

In an ideal world, we would have enough time and resources to prepare our offshore and global teams holistically. We spare no expense preparing our teams technically or in terms of infrastructure (machines, technology, etc.); however, many companies skimp on cultural preparation. In fact, cultural training often seems to be the last thing on the list of many companies who are setting up and running global teams.

There are many reasons cross-cultural training is given a backseat. We lack time. We lack patience. We assume that since other teams have worked successfully without it in the past, so will we. We assume that the other companies may have cultural differences, but we won't. Even when we recognize that new or inexperienced employees may require cross-cultural training, we may worry that more experienced professionals could be offended by the suggestion that they could benefit from it.

We believe that we can communicate clearly with others, and we may assume that those in other cultures are motivated, taught, and mentored in the same way. We may also assume that they will appreciate our efforts in moderating discussions and teaching them ways to do and improve things, because aren't these techniques the same across cultures in today's global world? Hasn't the world become flatter? If so, cultural training simply isn't required, right?

Wrong!

The pages that follow share stories and suggestions that elucidate the reasons for cross-cultural training, learning across borders, sharing information, and even giving 'constructive criticism.' Ia man American with almost twenty years of experience travelling to and from India. I was the first American to earn a Master's degree at Madras Christian College. I then worked in India as a social worker and a trainer, and I now live in Kochi, Kerala (South India)a woman married into an Indian family. Because I have been both a student and a teacher in India, I know some of the differences of teaching and learning between the cultures.

This article sheds light on the communication, mentorship, motivation, and relationship building skills that are key factors for success. Understanding these needs is a critical tool in the toolbox of an empathetic manager of global, outsourced teams in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) all the way up to Multinational Corporations (MNCs).

Building Relationships

Starting with one's 'good name,' a typical south Indian introduction details one's family background, 'native place' (hometown), as well as one's spouse's and immediate family members' names and qualifications. In some cases, hobbies are also discussed. I am married to an Indian who is originally

from the same town I work in; many find this intriguing. This curious fact often breaks ice and builds bridges in a climate where many on the training floor may feel they have nothing in common with me.

Many Americans may wonder how I justify this kind of introduction. I surely wouldn't use this introduction in the US, so why do I do it in India? It is out of necessity. In my experience, the likability of a trainer or coach has a significant effect on the participants' level of engagement. While some may argue that local trainers do not have to do this, keep in mind that I am a foreigner. People will approach me very differently than a local person that they share a common thread with.

Last but not least celebrating joyous occasions with others, showing dedication and care, and apologizing appropriately when required go a long way in building relationships in and out of the training room. While food is universally used to celebrate, food can also be used to say 'I'm sorry' when words get in the way. In India, I have learned heart of apologizing without words. It is not easy, but this is one of the cultural differences I quite like. In one situation, I was alerted to a social gaffe I committed. I was very embarrassed and knew that saying, "I'm sorry" would not communicate my true feelings. Instead, the next day, I purchased a big cake and salty snacks. Before sharing them with the group, I told them how much I cared about them and wanted to see all of them succeed. They all looked at me with an immediate look of understanding. They knew I was apologizing for my mistake, and they were happy to accept my peace offering. I also know this worked because while partaking in the food, on this third day of training, everyone came to me and held lively conversations with me. It was an amazing experience.

I also believe in sharing with groups my emotional connection to their success. There have been a few sessions where emotions ran high because of a pressing need for the trainees to absorb and apply the information. I also felt their discomfort and nervousness about adapting to these new mindsets and behaviors, so I temporarily stopped the session and shared, "I know this is all new for you. If I were you, I'd also feel overwhelmed and confused. I am here to help you to succeed. Your success is my success. I share in your success and your struggles. I care about you. I care about your success. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask them so that I can help you to understand this better." In a few cases, when I shared this, I actually started tearing up. I would never get so dramatic or emotional in an American training room. Though this emotional display was never planned, I felt Indians connect to this emotion in a way that motivates them to take more responsibility for positive outcomes.

Importance of Facilitation to Enhance Group Learning

Facilitation is touted as a key element of successful training programs across the board. Facilitation has more successful outcomes than a lecture for the three key reasons given below.

Lack of Reference Point

Unlike hard-skills training which already has a reference point, many participants may not have any previous experience with the soft-skills or cross-cultural modules presented. Facilitation allows

participants to explore the material in a deeper and more relevant way than they have been able to do in most traditional educational experiences.

Sharing as a Group vs. Individual Sharing

Many Indians prefer to share their experiences as a group. I have noticed that many participants are comfortable speaking up about topics that others have already spoken about, rather than talking about something unchartered. Instead of feeling that others will appreciate their boldness in discussing unfamiliar topics, many in the training programs seem to approach sharing unfamiliar stories with hesitation and a sense that they may be unfairly judged for talking about things they are not 100% certain about.

Speaking, Thinking, and Communicating in English

English is a second language for a majority of participants. While understanding written language is not usually a problem, holistic comprehension—listening, speaking, and thinking —must be taken into consideration while planning and delivering sessions.

Couple these fluency challenges with the delivery of new and unfamiliar topics and possible confidence issues in speaking up in English with their peers (and the first native speaker/foreigner they have met), and it is not hard to understand why session facilitation can take longer than it would for those already fluent in a language.

To overcome this, I have changed my teaching style dramatically. Rather than deliver concepts in a lecture format, they are delivered in small chunks as group discussion topics, case studies, or role-playing exercises. Initially, I was worried about how the group would absorb the information if I did not deliver it in the form of a lecture, as the concepts and terminology would be new to them. Through trial and error, and an ability to think on my feet, I have pared down the lecture section, speaking in smaller chunks, relying on videos (with English subtitles wherever possible), and providing descriptive analysis. Since their strength is in reading the written word, the concepts that were to be delivered as a lecture became handouts for the participants to read and use in tandem with the role-playing exercises, demos, mocks, group discussions, and case studies. Again, I have to plan time for them to read and absorb the material. Often, the role play sections require a significant amount of time, and are often facilitated in the afternoon after lunch, allowing participants 3-4 hours for knowledge transfer, group discussion, creation of role play conversations, role play delivery, feedback from facilitator, and redelivery with mistake correction as time permits.

Breaking lectures into bite-size chunks helps to solve two problems: improving concentration and reducing tiredness and boredom. In training professors to teach adult learners, American institutions like the University of Michigan and Illinois University suggest breaking lectures into smaller, manageable portions of 15-20 minutes each as most adults have attention spans of 15-20 minutes. Couple this with listening to someone speaking in a foreign language or accent, and having to translate what they say in your head into your native language, and this becomes even more important. In addition to helping participants maintain focus, offering less information through lecture and more

through written materials and group discussion gives the participants a chance to discuss the concepts and learn from each other. Initially, I was quite nervous about this method of facilitation, thinking that my instructions or lecture would be too vague and would not give the participants all the information they needed. I can confidently say that the participants always exceed my expectations. Unlike Americans, Indians are more comfortable with a lack of process, step-by-step instructions, and vagueness. Because of this, group discussions on the concepts coupled with interaction with the facilitator in small groups to discuss concepts and answer questions have led to much more successful outcomes.

Those familiar with teaching second language learners may use many of these techniques. Since I facilitate training in India, I frequently visit websites and professional development materials for English as Second Language (ESL) teachers and apply them appropriately as required.

The Art of Addressing Mistakes in a Public Forum

Pointing out mistakes in front of peers is a common scenario in India, especially where I live in South India. This is not only common in college, but in the workplace as well. There have been many times I have been specifically requested by managers in India to use specific team members' names and their specific scenarios as examples of what not to do. This approach would not usually be tolerated in the US—it would be considered too direct, as well as a breach of confidentiality and an embarrassment for the employee. When managers initially approached me with this request, it was a shock and a great discomfort based on my cultural context. Over time, I have become used to this approach and I can confidently report that the sessions that include some kind of public criticism tend to have better feedback than those that do not.From my American viewpoint, I feel Indians may think they are learning when they are correcting their mistakes, where as Americans may feel they are only learning when they are encouraged to do the right thing. Both approaches, in my opinion have some merit to them.

In India, I have not only learned how to dole out criticism in a public forum, but I am continuing to learn how to handle it being doled out to me as well! While learning to give it to others has been an easier process, learning to accept more direct criticism has not at all been an easy process for me.

Management consulting clients have told me that while negative feedback is given in a group setting, the positive aspects of achievement are kept private. When asked why this happens, a few managers relayed that if too much praise about team members or company achievements is advertised, employees often become jealous and territorial. As an example, if a company wins many new client contracts because of the extraordinary work that was put in, and this is advertised to the company, employees may start wondering about the company's excess revenue and start demanding raises. Similarly, if one person gets praised in a public forum (be it face-to-face, e-mail, etc.), that employee may attempt to use that as a valid reason for getting a raise.

After completing routine work on time, Umesh (name changed) received an e-mail from the US client

praising his work. He immediately printed out this e-mail, took it to his boss, and demanded a raise citing positive feedback from the client. Because many may feel entitled to awards or pay hikes when even small achievements are praised, the culture tends to lean towards self-deprecation and pointing out other's faults. Rather than being motivated by achievements, some expat managers have seen that this 'public shaming' motivates employees to do better as it provides group accountability.

Because of this approach, many companies have specifically asked me to deliver training sessions from a 'dos and don'ts' approach where the attendees are to showcase their work as it usually is done in order to be publicly corrected by the trainer in front of the whole group. Popular topics for these kinds of sessions include:

- Improving conference calls (actual client calls are analyzed forword choice, etiquette, pleasantries, accent, etc.)
- E-mail writing seminars (actual e-mails of clients and colleagues are reviewed and corrective actions are advised or discussed.)
- Professional mannerisms within the team (scenes based on interactions between colleagues and client are enacted for behavior modification.)

Like sharing in-depth introductions about me in the sessions, pointing out others' mistakes in a public forum goes against my cultural upbringing. Yet, after finding ways to do this without compromising my style and personality (and without feeling guilty about it), I have seen dramatic and positive results. Participants and their managers write to me within weeks or months of the training gloating about how the employee in question has improved their relationship with their client due to the training. The Indian participants, unlike most Americans, do not take the mistake personally (even if it's their e-mail or interaction that is being analyzed);they understand that the mistakes are being pointed out and explained for the betterment of the group. From this perspective, they practice the corrections with the coach through writing e-mails, role playing, or future client calls and internalize the new behaviors. Over time the new behaviors become routine.

Conclusion

Often, the best cross-cultural lessons come from in-the-moment interactions. This article strived to highlight this throughout. While it is important to intellectually understand the cultural differences, internalizing them and creating new behavioral outcomes is an uncomfortable proposition. The training room provides a safe space for participants to practice. And, as the facilitator, I help each participant to achieve their own success through my own unique blend of relationship building, group learning through facilitation, and mistake identification and correction.

About Jennifer Kumar

Jennifer Kumar is the Managing Director of Authentic Journeys Consultancy, based in Infopark in Kochi, India. With over 15 years' experience working, living and studying between the US and India, she provides a unique perspective to bridging the cultural gaps that exist in teaching, training, and working between the countries.

Authentic Journeys Consultancy has a track record of working with professionals operating within all outsourcing models – onsite, offsite, offshore and hybrid in a range of business verticals including software, IT, financial, and health care. Regardless of working with small to medium size enterprises (SMEs) and startups or large multinational corporations (MNCs), outcomes in corporate coaching focus on building effective, harmonious and productive global teams predominantly with Indian and native English speaking Western counterparts.

To learn more about Authentic Journeys Consultancy, visit the website at http://authenticjourneys.info/

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