

MANAGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

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CSCE 315 Writing Assignment

Abstract

Almost every project is bound to run into problems that weaken the resolve of the team or disrupt the work flow. Predicting and preparing for these problems in advance can help with the successful completion of projects. While the world is getting more inter-connected and cross-cultural interactions are being encouraged for its many advantages, especially in the work environment, these interactions bring with them a wide range of risks. This paper's main objectives include attempting to find the cause of these risks and conflicts, understanding the issues they might cause if not dealt with, and dealing with the risks (conflict resolution). This paper includes situations faced by employees frequently in the work environment and examples of advantages of cross-cultural project teams. Certain popular theories of cross-cultural differences are also discussed. This paper concludes by describing the importance of cross-cultural literacy and the need to integrate with different cultures in the 21st century.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, conflict resolution, projects, work environment, risks, issues

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A project's success is defined by the team's tenacity, perseverance and innovation. In the software industry, innovation is the most important of these qualities. With the level of complexity of products that are being designed in the contemporary world, innovation is becoming extremely perplexing but also essential. Having a culturally and functionally diverse team is important to contribute to innovation. The integration of a group of individuals from diverse backgrounds provides a vast array of insights, experiences, values and skills. But for these individuals to come together and form an effectively functioning unit without the possibility of conflict is impossible.

Culture is defined as 'the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time' by the Cambridge Dictionary¹. Therefore, a cross-cultural team entails differences in livelihoods, beliefs and morals and creates a possibility for prejudices. While certain conflicts of characteristics in different cultures such as masculinity vs femininity, individualism vs collectivism do not affect the work environment as long as employees are motivated by work ethic and project success and nothing else, certain conflicts of characteristics do cause problems. When a team has both internalistic and externalistic members, or short-term oriented and long-term oriented members, there is a lack of trust in the effectiveness of certain work practices, and this might hinder project progress. Of the cultural characteristic differences described in 'Managing cross cultural differences in projects' (2009),

¹ "CULTURE: Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary." CULTURE | definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary. Accessed April 12, 2020.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/culture>.

the differences between cultures that affect successful project completion are discussed in detail later on in this paper.

Advantages of a multicultural work force

The advantages of experiences and insights from different backgrounds are plenty. History shows us that people from various regions have incorporated other cultures' ideologies and art into their own work. For example, the Arabic language and Muslim artistic culture have had profound impacts on West Africa's art and language when West Africa's main trade was art and was the site of intellectual exchange². Similarly, invoking the design and languages of different cultures into a project helps communicate the product efficiently to different customers and improves the design. Cultural hybridization is the process by which different elements of different cultures blend together. Hybridization of the work force is the inclusion of work and management practices of the different team members to enhance the functioning of the company.

Perspective and experience

A plethora of viewpoints provides the 'out of the box' thinking that drives innovation. A team stuck on a challenge could be relieved by a team member from a group that has faced the problem already. Experience is the most important asset a member brings to a team. Different cultures provide individuals with different skills, automatically leading to the creation of a cross-functional team. It is important for companies and project managers to build a platform for voices to be heard.

Local market knowledge

² "Cross-Cultural Influences." World Eras. Encyclopedia.com, April 12, 2020.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/cross-cultural-influences>.

Locals have greater knowledge of the region's interests, limitations, needs, and people. By employing a diverse workforce, a company will be able to learn more about different locales. If a product is targeted towards a certain group or region, having a native on the team will make it easier to sell the product and tweak it to include the specific needs of the end user improving the quality of the product. The company's customer base, and consequently, their global reach will increase because of having employees from different regions. Examples of some companies that have failed overseas due to the lack of local management knowledge are Starbucks being rejected in Australia for their apparent lack of diverse roasts, BestBuy in Europe for their lack of knowledge of Europeans' preferences of smaller shops to larger 'box stores'³

Retaining the best talent in the job market

Some prospective candidates are more comfortable joining a company if the existing workforce already includes people from their cultures. By having a diverse group, the company will be able to attract better talent and experience. By retaining employees from different cultures, a company will gain loyalty from its candidates and appear attractive to prospective employees as well. The employees tend to develop a feeling of mutual respect for each other and feel important.

Crossvergence

According to 'Cultural differences in project management' (2010), crossvergence is "all about fusing together management practices of two or more cultures, so that a practice relevant to a heterogeneous culture can be assembled". The heterogeneous culture in this case is a global

³ Editor, Staff, and Staff Editor. "10 Successful American Businesses That Have Failed Overseas." International Business Degree Guide, September 12, 2013.
<https://internationalbusinessguide.org/10-successful-american-businesses-that-have-failed-overseas/>.

team or a company's work force in general. When the company and project managers create an environment for employees that invokes the principles and practices of multiple cultures, each employee feels comfortable enough to contribute in their own way. Different management theories lead to healthy mix of skills and beliefs.

Cross cultural differences that affect project management

These differences reflect a cultural gap in daily life and consequently, the work environment. These differences are provided only to enhance our understanding of why they may pose problems to projects – not to pass judgement. Only those differences that affect work progress are listed.

Individualism vs Collectivism

Individualism is a “preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families”. Collectivism represents “a reference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular ingroup to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”⁴. The degree of individualism or collectivism of cultures is measured as IDV. The importance of an employee's preference on individualism or collectivism is immense since their preference could affect the dynamic of the group. The level of trust exercised by team members is also important to the success of the team.

Power distance

⁴ Hofstede. “National Culture.” National Culture. Accessed April 13, 2020. <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture>.

Power distance “expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally”⁴. Employees from cultures that have low power distance might constantly demand justification of their responsibilities and roles, while questioning the instructions of those hierarchically above them in the company. Contrarily, employees from cultures that experience a larger degree of power might not feel confident enough to raise objections to unjust distributions of power and responsibilities. It is important to make the employees feel that their voices are heard. Disgruntled employees do not see motive to stay with the company or work efficiently.

Internalistic vs Externalistic

Internalistic people do not believe in the concept of luck or predestination. They believe in their own individual resolute to be the reason behind any event, not some external factor. While externalistic people believe that “mankind is one of nature’s forces, so should operate in harmony with the environment” (Managing cross cultural differences in projects, 2009). They tend to adapt to external circumstances. For a team consisting of both sets of employees, the difference in proactive and reactive personalities could lead to a misbalance of power.

Conflict Resolution

The need to resolve the issues caused by cultural differences amongst the workforce is clear. The diversity in the workforce leads to confusion and misinterpretation. The solution is simply to be open to change and cultural hybridization. To manage such conflicts, the company and management must recognize the different cultures. Choosing to ignore the different cultures will only result in dissatisfaction and further conflict. By educating employees of the importance of different cultures and creating a friendly environment where employees are able to socialize,

there will be lesser confusion and a greater awareness of the significance of different cultures and their practices.

Different accents and spellings must be recognized in the work place. For example, Americans write 'color' whereas British write it as 'colour'. Accepting these differences and communicating effectively by accounting for the different accents is important. While some cultures such as Nigeria, India and Japan respond well to secretive work, some may not feel comfortable with confidential information. Silence is interpreted differently by different cultures. North Americans believe it is a breakdown in communication while others interpret it as harmony. Certain gestures such as pointing a finger or waving is considered an insult in Greece.

Such differences should not just be recognized but also appreciated while communicating. For employees to be satisfied with their work, strong leadership and clear messages are essential. Project managers must spend time learning about the cultures of different team members so any conflicts between members could be resolved immediately. Making sure minorities are given a chance to voice their opinions strengthens the integrity of the team. Cultural literacy is key to resolving conflict.

Conclusion

The integration of different cultures is inevitable in the 21st century. Cultural differences could lead to greater quality and larger perspectives, or cause confusion and conflict. Strong leadership and a stronger motivation to overcome these differences to achieve a common goal is important to the success of any project or company. It is the duty of the management team to induce such leadership and motivation. A company's greatest resources are its employees.

Educating employees of the importance of the diversity enriches the work environment and providing them with the resources and motivation to work together efficiently is the key to success.

References

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