



JOURNAL ARTICLE

CULTURE CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

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**Working Together**

The current trend towards the merging of international organisations provides opportunities for different nations to work together, within a project environment. With the continuing moves towards free trade between nations, there is also a greater incentive for organisations to undertake international projects.

Organisations working together on international projects initially begin by using their own, familiar, approaches to managing and working. These methods of working can provide significant benefits to international projects. However, there can also be distinct differences in the way organisations from the various nations work. Sometimes the difficulties of working with these differences appear to outweigh the benefits of the project. Figure 1. illustrates some of the benefits and differences of working together.

Within international projects, there is a need for participants and stakeholders to understand the working characteristics of the partners, at an early stage. There may also be a need for appropriate mechanisms to assess and minimise any difficulties relating to the management approaches of nations.

**National Characteristics**

The national culture of a nation, or region, encompasses all the characteristics and influences, such as lifestyle, work, or religion, upon the individual or group. These may be tangible and very visible, such as geography, or they may be intangible and difficult to define clearly, such as logic, Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Examples of National Characteristics**

| <b>Tangible</b>              |
|------------------------------|
| Geography                    |
| Governance                   |
| Language                     |
| Legal processes              |
| Lifestyles                   |
| Religions                    |
| Transport infrastructure     |
| <b>Intangible</b>            |
| Ethics                       |
| Levels of tolerance          |
| Gender issues                |
| Perception of discrimination |
| Philosophical ideals         |

The national characteristics of different nations are often very well described in various official publications. In addition, they are often the subjects of independent publications, such as travel or business guides.

It is essential that managers, who are involved with international projects, are aware of the national cultural characteristics of participants. This awareness will help to ensure the success of the project in a number of ways including:

**Figure 1. Working Together**

| <b>Working Benefits</b>             | <b>Example</b>  |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Improved understanding of language  | Better translation and interpretation of language                       |
| New insights into culture           | Working with other nations allows participation in different lifestyles |
| Novel approaches to problem solving | Different ways of thinking can help solve persistent problems           |
| New perspectives                    | Working with other nations provides different views on projects         |

| <b>Working Differences</b> | <b>Example</b>   |
|----------------------------|--|
| Culture                    | The need to respect traditions may cause delays                          |
| Environment                | Unexpected legal, political or religious restrictions may be encountered |
| Management styles          | May appear too dominant, too remote, or require different emphasis       |
| Working methods            | Could be too prescriptive, or too slack                                  |



Identifying and understanding the different national culture characteristics  
Assessment of the national culture boundaries and levels of tolerance available  
Preparing for the impact of changes to the national culture, such as new legislation

### Business Culture

Over time, organisations develop their own unique business, or working, culture. This will be strongly influenced by the national culture of the organisations originating nation. However, other aspects will also influence the business culture of organisations. These may result directly from the process, delivery or marketing needs, of the organisations, or come from less direct sources, such as trading partners, competitors or transactions with other nations, Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Examples of Business Characteristics**

| <b>Tangible</b>               |
|-------------------------------|
| Business Standards            |
| Management Styles             |
| Timeliness                    |
|                               |
| <b>Intangible</b>             |
| Decision making               |
| Logic and thinking            |
| Respect for business partners |
| Trust between partners        |

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Awareness and understanding the effects of business culture will help the synergy of international projects in a number of ways:

- Understanding how the business culture can be adapted to the needs of the project
- Assessing how the project will need to be adapted to the business culture of participants
- Awareness of the impact of differences in business characteristics
- Understanding the way project participants work and conduct their business

### Assessing Culture

With the potential for many cultural variations to be introduced by international project participants there is a need to perform a detailed analysis of any cultural differences, at an early stage. These assessments will provide comprehensive information relating to the cultural boundaries and levels of tolerance available to the project. Techniques, such as Spectra Analysis (Figure 4.), provide frameworks for cultural assessments.

Once the initial assessments are complete, the results should be included within the project initiation documents concerned with working practices and organisation.

**Figure 4. Spectra Analysis Framework Summary**

| <b>Step</b>         | <b>Objective</b>   |
|---------------------|--|
| Data Gathering      | Obtain data on the participant's management styles and ways of working.<br>Identify acceptable ways of working for each participant.   |
| Spectra Analysis    | Identify extent of similarities and differences in working methods of participants.<br>Provide a visual indication of similarities and differences in organisation cultures. |
| Resolve Issues      | Obtain early agreement on the most appropriate procedures that can be used.<br>Agree approaches to mitigating remaining areas of differences.                                |
| Communicate         | Ensure that all participants are aware of any potential differences.<br>Publicise agreed procedures and mitigation methods.  |
| Monitoring & Report | Provide checks to ensure that procedures and mitigation methods are working.<br>Provide reports relating to areas with continuing difficulties.                              |



Mechanisms should also be included within the project to allow the documents to be updated, and take account of new intercultural issues. The results of the assessments should also be reviewed regularly, at least during project stage reviews.

### Remote Working and Communications

Most international projects involve participants from geographically, or culturally, different regions. The traditional ways of working in these projects involved the relocation of most resources to specific sites. Today, many projects, such as software development or e-commerce, do not require the majority of resources to be located in project sites. However, project teams located in different countries will usually operate within the business culture of their host nations.

It is important to understand, and make appropriate allowances for the different ways of working, managing and communicating in each of the national environments. Remote management of international projects enables participants in one country to manage those in another country.

Managers working on international projects need to be aware of the working preferences at remote sites. They also need to be aware of the different methods of communication that can be used, and their impact on the remote users. Guidelines should be provided for the usage of different communications methods, Figure 5.

### Effects on Projects

The cultural characteristics of the participating nations can have a significant impact on the way a project is managed. Cultural differences may result in difficulty in gaining agreements on management and working methods. The effects of culture may result in the project, or components, being managed in apparently unconventional ways.

It is therefore necessary for project managers working on international projects to be aware of the various issues relating to the cultural aspects of the project, including:

- Understanding the different working methods of the nations
- Maintaining an awareness of the similarities, and differences between nations
- Identifying the cultural boundaries in which the project must operate
- Managing the additional risks resulting from operating outside of cultural boundaries
- Understanding the ways that resources from different nations would intend to work in international projects

**Figure 5. Guidelines For Improving Communications**

| Guideline  | Example Technique   |
|--|---|
| Ensure communication channels take account of organisation differences | Brief main project team regularly.<br>Provide managers with access to regular reports                                       |
| Ensure the opportunity is provided to discuss culture issues           | Provide a Culture Issues topic on the agenda for all progress meetings  |
| Keep documents short, use simple words, numbers and diagrams           | Weekly / Monthly progress reports are limited to short, single page, illustrated summaries                                  |
| Provide opportunities for discussion groups to reinforce understanding | Allow extra time at the end of project briefings for participants to informally discuss their understanding with each other |
| Translate significant presentations / documents into local languages   | Translate all key documents into all the main languages, not just the common or official languages                          |
| Where possible use diagrams, symbols or figures in all documents       | Progress reports should use 'Traffic Lights', or 'Emoticons' to show whether targets are being achieved                     |



When culture related problems occur within an international project, the project manager must know how to manage them. They must be managed in a sensitive way, early on, taking into account the cultural characteristics of the teams involved. Some examples of ways of managing common problems are given in Figure 6.

**Conclusions**

It is essential that project managers, involved with international projects, are aware of the national and business culture of participating nations. This awareness will allow them to utilise the business practices for the benefit of the project, including:

Assessing how much of the project management needs will have to be adapted to the business culture of the participants

Assessing how much the business culture characteristics can be adapted to the project needs  
Being aware of the potential impact of differences in business characteristics

Making allowances for negotiating, understanding and communications

Understanding the way participants work and conduct their business

Understanding the additional constraints that may be required by various participants

**Figure 6. Techniques For Managing Cultural Differences**

| Sample Difference                           | Example Technique   |
|---|---|
| Differences in priorities                   | Agree tasks, timings and their significance. Prioritise according to agreed guidelines.           |
| Different levels of hierarchy               | Provide organisation charts showing equivalent levels. If possible, remove unnecessary layers     |
| Different standards or methodologies in use | Assess similarity of standards and provide guidelines and tables for conversions                  |
| Geographical differences                    | Use electronic communications, where possible. Allow additional time for travel and recuperation. |
| No efficient common language                | Use interpreters / translators where possible. Translate key documents into all main languages.   |
| Technology not compatible                   | Identify base levels of compatible technology<br>Upgrade to new levels of technology              |

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**Business Culture**

Identifying and understanding the types of culture in organisations  
Assessing and mitigating culture related issues

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