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# The impact of national culture on the transfer of “best practice operations management” in hotels in St. Lucia

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## Abstract

This article briefly outlines the convergence vs. divergence debate before describing research into the potential impact of national culture on the transfer of “best practice operations management” to hotels in St. Lucia. The main focus of the paper is on the findings of fieldwork, which supports the contention that national culture does potentially create a barrier to the successful transposition of approaches developed elsewhere. In the case of St. Lucia high uncertainty avoidance and leanings towards high power distance appeared to hinder the adoption of teamworking, empowerment and communication. In addition, attitude towards time and punctuality also mitigated against the provision of a reliable service as and when required. However, with training and supportive HR practices, the end results achieved by International Chains did demonstrate the value of operating “people friendly” policies in line with “best practice”.

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## 1. Introduction

Often referred to as the convergence vs. divergence debate, arguments are still on-going as to whether or not, with increasing globalisation, organisations and cultures are becoming more and more alike. The research of Foster and Minkes (1999) seems to support convergence at an organisational structure level, but divergence at the micro, or operational level. McGaughey and De Cieri (1999) pointed out that Adler argues that studies at the macro-level support convergence whilst those at a micro-level support divergence, but they believe that this is too simplistic. This debate is relevant to the research described here, insofar as supporters of convergence would argue that it is possible to identify one best way of operating in a given industry. Supporters of divergence, however, would argue that because of differences in the beliefs, values and attitudes of people of different cultures, operational practices need to be adapted in order to work successfully.

An examination of core operations management textbooks (Chase, Aquilano, & Jacobs, 2000; Hope &

Mühlemann, 1997; Meredith & Shafer, 2001; Russell & Taylor, 2000; Slack, Chambers, & Johnston, 2001) written in the English language lends support to the existence of “best practice” as the underlying messages in most of them is very similar. For a fuller discussion of “best practice” operations management, please see Hope and Mühlemann (1998, 2001). Hope and Mühlemann (2001), Morden (1999) and Rodrigues (1998) have all argued that adaptations may need to be made when transferring “best practice” between nations because of the impact of national culture and have suggested how differences have implications for managers. Roney (1997) identified problems encountered when attempting to introduce TQM into a manufacturing context in Poland, which could be attributed to national cultural differences. Similarly, Huyton and Ingold (1995) reported that the Ritz Carlton faced operational problems in Hong Kong despite trying to operate in the same manner that had won them the Malcolm Baldrige Award for Quality in the USA. Teare (1993) explained how the Hyatt chain does recognise the need to adapt procedures when operating in different countries. However, research, particularly in the service sector has not been extensive, and although evidence clearly exists which supports the argument that national

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culture does have an impact on the successful transfer of “best practice”, knowledge is still sketchy regarding just what nuances of culture impact on which aspects of “best practice”.

McLaughlin and Fitzsimmons (1996), in a paper discussing strategies for globalising service operations concluded:

“With globalization, the impact of cultural adaptation will need to be central to our study of operational topic areas such as joint venturing, materials management, purchasing, new product development, layout and process design, supervision and motivation, training, work force scheduling, environmental management and labour-management relations. These are all key areas of front room and back room management that are likely to require adaptation from country to country as services are globalised” (pp. 55–56).

Proponents of contingency theory on the other hand question whether national culture impacts on managerial practices. They argue that organisation design and organisational culture is linked to other factors such as size, nature of the industry and other operational conditions and that these are the major factors which dominate management. Child and Kieser (1979) in a study of German and UK firms found evidence which suggested that factors such as size, etc. did affect the *structure* of firms, as per contingency theory, but that the relationship between these factors and managers’ roles was less consistent. They found that their data suggested that the cultural factor had most bearing upon modes of individual conduct and interpersonal relationships.

Child and Tayeb (1983) compared the contingency approach with that held by radical theorists and political economists and those arguing the cultural (or divergence) perspective. They seem to conclude that they are all valid to a point, but are interlinked:

“We therefore arrive at the conclusion that it is an error to disregard factors identified by any of the three theoretical perspectives” (p. 54).

The research reported in this paper attempts to contribute to the debate by considering the impact of “best practice operations management” in hotels in St. Lucia and was partly confirmatory and partly exploratory in nature. Theory and prior research does suggest that cultural differences will impact on operations (Huyton & Ingold, 1995; Purcell, Nicholas, Merrett, & Whitwell, 1999; Roney, 1997) and in that sense the study was intended to provide further confirmation that this is the case—in other words, that it is not possible to identify one mode of operating which may be labelled “best practice”. However, the fieldwork itself was to be undertaken in St. Lucia where knowledge of the

characteristics of the culture is limited and in that sense the research was exploratory.

### 1.1. *Background: cultural dimensions*

It is an accepted fact that there are different cultures throughout the World (Adler, 2002; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997; Warner & Joynt, 2002). The societies in which we grow up have their own sets of rules about the way we behave and interact with others. These rules or norms are not written down and we are often not even conscious of them. A great deal of research has been undertaken in an attempt to understand just what *culture* is and how the various national cultures differ. Space does not permit a full review of this literature here, suffice it to say that various “cultural dimensions” have been identified by quite a number of researchers (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1980, 1994; Schein, 1985; Tayeb; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). There is no definitive list of these although common themes and overlaps occur (Hope, Mühlemann, & Potter, 2000). Examples of these dimensions include: collectivist vs. individualist—this relates to whether we place importance on loyalty to the in-group or, on the other hand, we value and reward individuals and ties between individuals are loose; and high vs. low uncertainty avoidance—defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 113); low vs. high power distance—“the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 28).

The purpose of this research was neither to measure where St. Lucia lies on these various cultural dimensions, nor to use one particular set of dimensions to analyse results. Rather an attempt was made to bear in mind Tayeb’s (2001) strictures:

“...national culture is a complex construct and we simplify them at our own peril. But regrettably, many authors of cross cultural studies have a tendency to focus on a few dimensions and ignore various aspects of cultures which might have equally significant bearings on people’s values, attitudes and behaviours” (p. 95).

When analysing the results therefore, all the dimensions with which the author was familiar were borne in mind and contextual information was also sought in an effort to keep as open a mind as possible. In particular the author was aware at all times of the danger of her own “cultural baggage” (i.e. white British) acting as a filter and for example great efforts were made when conducting interviews to confirm understanding of what was said by the interviewees. For example, the author would summarise her understanding of what she had

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