



The role of culture in technology management research: National Character and Cultural Distance frameworks

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Abstract

Management research exploring the role of national culture on topics such as management style, strategy, and firm performance can broadly be divided into two categories. Studies that attempt to compare and contrast the impact of culture on organizations in different cultures have been labeled as “National Character” studies. These studies attempt to determine how specific cultural attributes affect actions, strategies and performance. The second type of culture study focuses on the interactions between two firms embedded in different national cultures. These studies look at the impact of “Cultural Distance” on the ability of organizations to successfully interact. It is this latter area which is becoming increasingly important to technology management in the “Flat World” of the 21st Century. Research propositions for technology management for each of the two frameworks are developed.

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It is 10:00 a.m. at the New York City office of a Spanish bank where a transaction is being executed in fractions of a second, transferring nearly US\$ 1 million between a US fruit importer and food processor and a Chilean grower. The US based firm contracted to purchase grapes at the beginning of the season. The fruit has been harvested, sent to the local inspection station operated by the US Department of Agriculture and then on to the adjacent shipping facility where the grapes will be packed for shipment to Miami. The computer transaction in New York was initiated by the bank in Cincinnati representing the importer and will show up on the balance of the grower in Chile instantaneously.

At approximately the same time, a multinational technology company that, among other things, manufactures mobile phones has assembled a top design team at its headquarters outside

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Chicago. Their task is to determine the design parameters for the next generation of mobile phones to be sold in the global market place. The phone is likely to be assembled in China from components produced there and in Europe. The code embedded on the phones' chip set will be written in Bangalore, India. The team responsible for testing the design will be based in Chengdu, China. Sales and marketing will be distributed throughout the global markets that the company hopes to serve.

In Ann Arbor, MI, a design team for a Japanese automobile manufacturer is tackling a similar task; the design of the 2010 model of the company's world economy car. Other auto manufacturers have struggled to adopt world platforms that balance needs for simplicity and efficiency in manufacturing with the special needs of distinct markets. Some manufacturers have been successful with such cars, but most have struggled. This car will be assembled in Japan, China, France, the US, Canada, and Brazil from components produced in those countries and several others by subsidiaries, partners, and independent suppliers. Depending on the assembly location, as many as 60% of the components could be sourced from other countries.

On the west coast of the US, a software company is faced with task of designing encryption and security software that allows companies to transmit sensitive data over the Internet with minimal risk of interception or degradation. The company's strategy and the basic design of the software were created at the US headquarters, but the elaboration of the design is being performed in Latvia and the code writing will be done in India.

1. Introduction

Each of these companies is part of what Friedman (2005) has labeled the "flat world," the seamless global economy that is producing, managing and, to a great extent, driven by technology. The ability to exploit (in the most positive sense of the word) the diverse global capabilities to produce, manage, implement and benefit from technology is essential to be able to function successfully in this flat world of the 21st Century. However, many examples exist of management or organizational techniques used in one national culture that have failed when transferred to a second culture (e.g., Calhoun et al., 2002; Kim et al., 1990) or that, at a minimum, are less effective in other cultures (e.g., Gales et al., 2006; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). This paper explores theory and research on culture and management to better understand the necessary conditions for successful management of technology in this flat world. Technology may be the tool necessary to conduct business, it may be the process for producing, it may be the product that is produced, or it may be all three. Regardless, the processes must be managed in a global cultural context and that is what presents the unique challenge. Essentially, this paper addresses the question of whether national culture matters in the management and diffusion of technology in the new flat world.

This paper will first review the dominant framework for understanding national culture. The focus then turns to a review of relevant research linking national culture to organizational actions. Although much of the cited research does not specifically address technology management issues, one can extrapolate that the same principles should apply. The paper concludes by using the two views on the role of culture – the "National Character" perspective and the "Cultural Distance" perspective – to arrive at specific research questions and prescriptions in the area of technology management.

The approach taken in this paper is decidedly normative and prescriptive with respect to the management of technology. In the tradition of contingency or "fit" theories (e.g., Tushman and Nadler, 1978), the implicit prescriptions offered are directed at optimizing efficiency and

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