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Situational construction of Dutch–Indian cultural differences in global IT projects

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KEYWORDS

Cross-cultural cooperation;
Offshoring;
Global projects;
India;
Power

Summary Cross-cultural cooperation of employees in geographically-distributed project teams has become an important topic in global IT projects. Traditional functionalistic and instrumental approaches in project management literature show the relevance of cross-cultural cooperation for project success, but they give insufficient insight into its daily practices. Based upon a study of cross-cultural cooperation between Dutch front office and Indian back office employees in four Multinational IT Service Providers – IBM, Accenture, Atos Origin and Philips – this paper suggests the constructed nature of cultural differences. The research demonstrated that Dutch front and Indian back office employees emphasized or denied, enlarged and bridged cultural differences to legitimise and/or de-legitimise asymmetric power relations in the projects. Front and back offices struggled over project control, client contact, and high-end jobs. In focusing on such a power-sensitive understanding of cultural differences, this paper contributes to the debate on managing global projects by illustrating that cultural differences are not completely fixed and static but can be constructed and used as a strategic source to gain specific goals connected to specific power constellations in a global project setting.

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The fast growth of global sourcing has directed attention towards the management of cross-cultural collaboration in global Information Technology (IT) projects. In global sourcing, employees develop software at geographically separated locations across national boundaries in a coordinated fashion involving real time or asynchronous interaction (Sahay, Nicholson, & Krishna, 2003). The objective behind these distributed projects is to take advantage of efforts made by local employees in multiple locations (Desouze & Evaristo, 2004). By character, the involvement of these employees makes global projects multicultural. In multicul-

tural projects, which combine features of conventional hierarchical management with those of networks (Hobday, 2000), successful cross-cultural cooperation between geographically-dispersed teams is paramount for an efficient and effective outcome. However, knowledge about how successful cooperation across cultures can be achieved in global IT projects is currently at an early stage, and remains fragmented in a number of academic and professional disciplines (Evaristo, Scudder, Desouza, & Sato, 2004).

Global projects differ from traditional projects in size, complexity, geographical distribution and context, and are characterised by a mixture of joint organisation and the subcontracting of workflow elements to legally-separate partners, which together make for a high degree of complexity (Fjermestad & Romano, 2006). Furthermore, global projects are situated in unstable, changing environments risking an

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'environmental drift' (Kreiner, 1995); this is when environment and project diverge, resulting in bad performance. Additionally, the management of global projects involves multiple competencies, each of which will be characterised by their specific rationalities, in such a way that talk, decisions and actions may not necessarily be aligned with each other. Thus, exogenous induced management practices may collide with the ongoing formation of a repertoire of project management routines (Bresnen, Goussevskaja, & Swan, 2005).

Cross-cultural management is a major theme for global project studies (Carmel & Tija, 2005; Dafoulas & Macaulay, 2001; Orr & Scott, 2008; Oza & Hall, 2005; Zwikaël, Shimuzu, & Globerson, 2005). In global projects, employees from diverse cultural backgrounds work together in geographically-distributed teams (Gopalan & Rivera, 1997). It is now widely recognised that national cultures, organisational cultures, professional cultures and project cultures influence the success of such projects (Chevrier, 2003; Dafoulas & Macaulay, 2001; Staples & Zhao, 2006). For example, in an empirical study of 18 high maturity Indian-based software vendor companies, respondents identified cultural differences as the most important challenge for global sourcing (Oza & Hall, 2005). Furthermore, if partners are unable to cope with diverse management styles and cultures within global projects, decision-making processes may slow down and tensions may emerge. Therefore, cultural differences are held responsible for cost overruns, time delays and the failure of many projects (Orr & Scott, 2008). This makes global sourcing a difficult process; 78% of companies that start off-shoring relinquish their activities (Matloff, 2005).

Moreover, cross-cultural cooperation in global IT projects does not take place in a power-free context. Asymmetric power relations between front offices and back offices can be expected as Western front offices are in direct contact with clients and control global IT projects while Indian back offices execute the software programming and testing. Nicholson and Sahay (2001), for example, studied cross-cultural cooperation in a British-Indian software outsourcing alliance and found that British managers enforced narrow economic issues at the cost of the loyalty, emotions and aspirations held by the Indian employees. The control over software outsourcing remained firmly rooted in the British organisation. Looking at such dynamics led Ybema and Byun (2009) to underline the context-dependent and constructed nature of cultural differences in intercultural interactions. They draw attention to the particular relevance of a power-sensitive understanding of claims concerning cultural differences. A number of other studies on cross-cultural cooperation has emphasised the use of cultural differences as a strategic source of power in cooperation practices (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003; Brannen & Salk, 2000; Byun & Ybema, 2005; Koot, 1997; Van Marrewijk, 2004). Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003), for example, studied cross-cultural cooperation in an Israeli-American merger in the high-tech industry. They observed Israeli employees using the Hebrew language to exclude their American colleagues in meetings and securing the implementation of an Israeli IT platform for the merger. In conclusion, exploring the use of cultural differences as a strategic source in the cross-cultural cooperation of project teams is vital for efficient global IT projects (Oza & Hall, 2005; Ybema & Byun, 2009).

This paper aims to determine the salient cultural differences in global IT projects and how these differences are used as strategic resources in collaborative practices. To answer these questions, a research team of six people carried out an in-depth qualitative study of four Multinational IT Service Providers (MITSP) with Dutch front offices and Indian back offices. The four cases studied are among the world's largest MITSP's: IBM, Accenture, ATOS Origin and Philips. The investigation was conducted between 2005 and 2007. In-depth case studies using qualitative ethnographic methods provide a good understanding of daily work floor practices and ensure the greater depth that cross-cultural analysis requires (Peterson, 2007). The paper contributes to the debate on project management by illustrating that cultural differences are not entirely fixed and static but can be constructed and used as a strategic source to attain specific goals connected to specific power constellations in an organisational setting.

The paper's argumentation is set up as follows. In the first section, traditional project management literature is criticised for its problematic constitutions. Next, an interpretative perspective on project management is proposed that includes context, history and power. The second section examines cross-cultural cooperation in global IT projects and tries to move away from essentialist value models of culture towards an interpretative understanding of cross-cultural cooperation. The third section presents the methodology used to study the four cases and reflects upon the limitations in this study. The fourth section presents cultural differences related to the three themes that emerge from the field data: time, communication and superior–subordinate relationship. Subsequently, the fifth section debates the asymmetric power relations between Dutch front office and Indian back office employees. The conclusion examines the study's implications for examining and managing global projects.

Global projects as object and outcome of social interactions

Traditional project management literature has been criticised for various different reasons: for not taking context into account (Kreiner, 1995), for leaving out project history (Engwall, 2003), for failing to align present management style to future projects outcomes (Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003) and for its top-down conception (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006). These concerns over traditional project management literature are shared by a group of Scandinavian scholars who argue that contemporary propositions for the improvement of project management knowledge and practice have been ill-conceived, reflecting fundamental misconceptions within the field (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Packendorff (1995), for example, outlined three problematic aspects of traditional project management. Firstly, project management is perceived as a general theory, one that has become a generic concept for all sorts of different disciplines and theories applicable to project work. In general, 'projects' are treated as a universal phenomenon and as fundamentally different from all non-project activities (Engwall, 2003). Secondly, they offer an abundance of normative advice despite the lack of empirical evidence. This justifies the need for empirical cases that give insight into the

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