

# Managing cross-cultural communication in multicultural construction project teams: The case of Kenya and UK

E.G. Ochieng<sup>a,\*</sup>, A.D.F. Price<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QE, UK*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Civil and Building Engineering, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK*

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## Abstract

The increasing global nature of construction projects has highlighted the importance of multiculturalism and the new challenges it brings to project execution. However, there has, as yet, been no empirical work that quantifies explicitly the extent to which communication determines the success of multicultural projects. This paper explores the ability of project managers in Kenya and the UK in communicating effectively on multicultural projects. The study examines the cultural factors that influence communication and explores how communication can be made effective in multicultural project environments. Using data from 20 interviews in Kenya (10) and UK (10), the results show that communications within multicultural project environments can be effective when project managers demonstrate an awareness of cultural variation. Participants further highlighted that, one of the critical components of building multicultural project teams is the creation and development of effective cross cultural collectivism, trust, communication and empathy in leadership. The study underscores an urgent need for future research to investigate effective guidelines or strategies for effective collectivism and communication in multicultural project teams.

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## 1. Introduction

Multicultural project teams have become more common in recent years, and contemporary international management literature has identified that the management of multicultural teams is an important aspect of human resource management. Recent studies have focussed on the positive effects of using multicultural teams, for example, Earley and Mosakowski (2000) stated that multicultural teams are used because they are perceived to out-perform monoculture teams, especially when performance requires multiple skills and judgement. However, there has been little research into construction-specific multicultural teams, and many construction organisations, although expanding into global operations do not fully appreciate the implica-

tions and are often unable to respond to cultural factors affecting their project teams.

In the last twenty years project management has developed considerably with a much greater understanding of the key variables that lead to project success. Project performance has been widely researched by a number of researchers (Baiden, 2006; Cheng et al., 2006; Chervier, 2003; Kumaraswamy et al., 2004; Ochieng, 2008), and the findings have clearly illustrated that best project performance is achieved when the whole project team is fully integrated and aligned with project objectives. During this period, there has been a change in the way that many major heavy construction engineering projects are delivered. This is especially noticeable in Western Europe where local levels of investment have dropped and many project management contractors are now working on projects in other parts of the world (Weatherley, 2006). The increased application and development of rapid worldwide electronic

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1224 263005

E-mail address: [E.G.Ochieng@rgu.ac.uk](mailto:E.G.Ochieng@rgu.ac.uk) (E.G. Ochieng).

communications has led to a number of heavy construction engineering projects being designed and developed in dispersed locations many thousands of miles away from the actual construction sites. In addition, there has been an inclination by clients to develop and undertake such projects in partnership with other companies as joint ventures, often collaborating with local companies based in the territory where the assets will be built. This has resulted in more multicultural project teams with team members from different cultures and backgrounds working together.

A number of authors including Weatherley (2006) agree that project success is difficult enough to accomplish where the project team is located close to the construction project environment, and the situation is made considerably complex for multicultural project teams, that are widely separated geographically and that have dissimilar organisational and regional cultures. The geographical division of multicultural project teams poses its own communication challenges. Emmitt and Gorse (2007) have shown that, for factual data transfer, a number of communication problems have been addressed due to the development of rapid global information systems and telecommunications, however, when it comes to multicultural project teams many issues remain unresolved. For example, the loss of face-to-face communication can lead to misunderstanding and the loss of non-verbal signals – such as eye contact and body language. This can subsequently lead to difficulty in achieving mutual trust and confidence within multicultural project teams. It is also difficult to manage or supervise multicultural project teams without face-to-face contact or to confer or develop relationships (Weatherley, 2006).

There is a need for increased research efforts in understanding influential factors that affect multicultural project teams. There is mounting evidence and opinion indicating that integrated team work is a primary key in efforts towards improving product delivery within the construction industry (Egan, 2002). Given the uniqueness of culture to particular project teams, and its persistent influence in societies and organisations this study presents a balance between the experiences of project managers from a European (UK) and African perspectives (Kenya). The study aimed to explore how project managers with different cultural background have managed communications on multicultural project teams. Specifically, the study was designed to explore the efficacy of cross-cultural communications strategies in heavy construction engineering project. For the purposes of this study, heavy engineering encompasses industrial projects which include power plants, pharmaceutical plants, refinery plants, highways and pipelines. Heavy engineering, projects can range from small to very large, and they are usually carried out for the client by contractors and sub contractors. The nature of these projects means the wealth of heavy engineering design and construction industry is inextricably bound up with the health of the world's economies. Clients can include oil, chemical, pharmaceutical, food manufacturing and water companies all over the world (on and offshore). For this reason, contractors and sub contractors work with a cross-section of clients in a variety of economic sectors. To ensure that the findings encapsulated the key contextual issues in multicultural teamwork, cultural differences pertaining to communication, between participants from Kenya and the UK were also investigated. A brief exami-

Table 1  
Cultural complexity projects managed by participants.

Year managed	Participant	Project	Country of Implementation	Impacts of cultural complexity	Project outcome	Participant country of origin
2004	A	Refinery plant	Dubai	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2005	B	Power plant	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2002	C	Pharmaceutical plants	UK	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2005	D	Refinery plant	Azerbaijan	Impacts were seen	Unsuccessful	England
2005	E	Refinery plant	Azerbaijan	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2005	F	Refinery plant	Azerbaijan	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2004	G	Power plant	Kenya	No impact in project	Successful	Kenya
2004	H	Dam	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2003	I	Food plant	UK	No impact in project	Successful better than expected	England
2001	J	Refinery plant	Saudi Arabia	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2003	K	Refinery plant	Azerbaijan	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2003	L	Power plant	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2003	M	Power plant	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2004	N	Dam	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2004	O	Dam	Ethiopia	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2004	P	Dam	Ethiopia	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2005	Q	Power plant	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya
2003	R	Manufacturing plant	Hong Kong	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2004	S	Refinery plant	Azerbaijan	Impacts were seen	Successful	England
2002	T	Dam	Kenya	Impacts were seen	Successful	Kenya

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