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# Cultural intelligence (CQ) in virtual, cross-cultural interactions: Generalizability of measure and links to personality dimensions and task performance



Alfred Presbitero\*

Department of Management, Deakin Business School, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have focused on investigating CQ in face-to-face contexts but very few have assessed CQ in virtual, cross-cultural interactions. This study highlights the relevance of cultural intelligence (CQ) as an intercultural capability in cross-cultural communications that are virtual. This two-study research (study 1:  $n = 274$ ; study 2:  $n = 223$ ) conducted in call centers in the Philippines (a) assesses the generalizability of the four-factor CQ model (i.e., cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and behavioral CQ) as applied in the virtual context and (b) tests the relationship between CQ, personality dimensions (i.e., openness to experience and extraversion) and supervisor's ratings of task performance. Study 1 results show that the structural validity of the four-factor CQ model was supported with minor issues in some of the items indicating the need to modify the CQ measure when utilized in the virtual context. Study 2 results show that CQ is positively and significantly related to openness to experience and extraversion. In addition, results show that CQ predicts task performance highlighting the importance of developing CQ among call center representatives and other working professionals who virtually engage and interact with clients and customers from culturally diverse backgrounds.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has attracted the attention of many scholars given the continuing rise of globalization requiring working professionals to deal and interact with people from various cultural backgrounds. With the advancements in information technology, firms have started to create virtual teams with members who are globally dispersed (Zander, Mockaitis & Butler, 2012) enabling them to carry out tasks across geographical locations. Virtual teams have enabled firms to improve their organizational efficiency and reduce operational costs by utilizing information and computer technologies (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Other than the creation of virtual teams, firms have also started to embrace offshore outsourcing or offshoring as a valuable strategy capitalizing on skills and innovative processes and practices available in other geographical locations (Oshri & Kotlarsky, 2009). Offshoring which has been defined as the purchase of services from a firm located in another country (Harrison & McMillan, 2006) brings about cost efficiency by contracting services in developing countries such as India, Malaysia, China and the Philippines (Barthelemy & Geyer, 2004; Javalgi, Dixit & Scherer, 2009; Oshri, Kotlarsky &

\* Corresponding author at: Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia.  
E-mail address: [alfred.presbitero@deakin.edu.au](mailto:alfred.presbitero@deakin.edu.au)

Willcocks, 2015; Raman & Chadee, 2011; Saxena & Bharadwaj, 2007). With rising costs and tougher competition in business, offshoring is considered as a valuable strategy by many multinational firms (Lampel & Bhalla, 2008).

One of the common services being offshored is the call center. Call centers are described mainly as “electronic sweatshops” (Garson, 1988) and regarded as “assembly lines in the head” (Taylor & Bain, 1999), as they involve laborious tasks of offering customer service and sales services (Thaler-Carter, 1999). Call centers provide services that are considered to be of high variability and require intensive engagement with clients and customers (Korczyński, 2002). As they rely heavily on verbal communication, language ability is critical in performing tasks in call centers. The ability to converse properly with clients and customers is a major component that drives task completion, which then leads to better patronage (Anton & Setting, 2004). The failure to communicate and respond accordingly to the needs and wants of clients and customers could result in loss of sales or profit (D’Ausilio, 1998). Workers in call centers, oftentimes called as “call center representatives” engage with clients and customers of different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. This cultural diversity of clients and customers can be challenging given that each culture has nuances that need to be understood and managed accordingly for interactions to progress smoothly and for tasks to be completed. Some customers could be direct and explicit in their communication patterns while others can be indirect and implicit (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Some customers could come from societies of high uncertainty avoidance while others come from an easy going, laid back society (Hofstede, 1980). Some customers could come from high emotional cultures while others from cultures that are neutral and controlling of emotions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Hence, call center representatives should have knowledge about different cultures and the ability to adjust their attitudes when dealing with clients and customers of different backgrounds. However, there is very little research done on intercultural capabilities of working professionals who interact intensively with foreign clients and customers virtually and at the comforts of their own home countries. There is virtually non-existent research on cultural intelligence and how it relates to task performance in virtually-oriented work such as in call centers.

This study aims to investigate cultural intelligence (CQ) in the context of virtual, cross cultural interactions. Previous studies have focused heavily on investigating CQ in the context of expatriations (e.g., Guðmundsdóttir, 2015; Huff, Song & Gresch, 2014; Lin, Chen & Song, 2012) where working professionals engage in face-to-face interactions with colleagues in a foreign country. To date, there is a dearth of study that looks into CQ as an intercultural capability in cross-cultural communications that are virtual. This study is timely given the continuing rise of cross-cultural communications that are technology-aided. With the prevalence of computer-aided communications such as in call centers, it is critical to understand CQ as an intercultural capability in virtual context and CQ’s influence on the ability to complete and perform virtual tasks effectively.

This study aims to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, this study bridges the gap in the literature by investigating CQ in virtual interactions, focusing on the psychometric properties of the CQ questionnaire as applied in call centers. The current version of the CQ questionnaire (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008), which has been widely tested mainly in expatriations and other face-to-face social interactions, demonstrates four factors (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and behavioral). This study would advance our knowledge on CQ by investigating the generalizability of the existing measure and the four-factor structure in the virtual work context. Second, this study determines how the level of CQ particularly among call center representatives relates to personality dimensions such as extraversion and openness to experience. To date, there has been little research on the relationship between these personality dimensions and CQ in virtual interactions. Third, most research on CQ focuses on outcomes such as cultural judgment, decision-making and cross-cultural adjustments (e.g., Ang et al., 2007; Guðmundsdóttir, 2015; Huff et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2012). This study takes an in-depth look into the relationship between CQ and task performance as rated by supervisors. The utilization of supervisor’s rating of task performance as opposed to self-rating of performance adds robustness to the study making it more credible to assert that CQ is a critical set of intercultural capability that could enhance task performance effectiveness. Finally, this study contributes to the literature on services offshoring and the critical role of CQ for working professionals who engage heavily in cross-cultural interactions that are virtual in nature.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the theoretical underpinnings of the paper and followed by the development of hypotheses. The methods and data used in the study were then discussed followed by data analysis and results. The last section of the paper includes a discussion of the implications of the main findings and offers avenues for research in the future.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Cultural intelligence

CQ has been defined as the capability of an individual to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity (Earley & Ang, 2003). Earley and Ang (2003) anchored the conceptualization of CQ in Sternberg and Detterman’s (1986) multiple loci of intelligence theory, highlighting the importance of motivational, mental, and behavioral capabilities. Earley and Ang (2003) identified four factors of CQ: (1) cognitive CQ; (2) metacognitive CQ; (3) motivational CQ; and (4) behavioral CQ.

Cognitive CQ refers to an individual’s knowledge of cultural environments, including norms, practices, and conventions (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). It refers to one’s knowledge about the similarities and differences across cultures (Livermore, 2011; Ng, Van Dyne, Ang & Ryan, 2012). According to Ang and Van Dyne (2008), as knowledge of cultures may affect and

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