

Fall 12-8-2013

# Addressing the Challenges of Cross-Cultural and Virtual Communication in the Workplace

Sarabjit Sundar

*Seton Hall University*, [sarabjit.sundar@student.shu.edu](mailto:sarabjit.sundar@student.shu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations>

 Part of the [Business and Corporate Communications Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Strategic Management Policy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Sundar, Sarabjit, "Addressing the Challenges of Cross-Cultural and Virtual Communication in the Workplace" (2013). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 1925.  
<https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1925>

Addressing the Challenges of  
Cross-Cultural and Virtual Communication in the Workplace  
Sarabjit Sundar

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Strategic Communication  
Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ  
December 8, 2013

### Abstract

The move toward a more global or geographically dispersed organization, together with the technology that is being used to enable this, has dramatically changed work and the workplace in the United States and United Kingdom within the last few decades (Ouye, 2011). This is prompting leaders to communicate with teams consisting of vastly different backgrounds, languages and styles, and to essentially ‘work at the same table’ in the absence of physical cues, such as facial expressions and gestures. Leaders of such teams are challenged to create a smooth operation despite the many differences; the possibilities for misunderstandings and cultural blunders can be magnified in these work situations, and leaders would benefit from expanding their own tools and techniques to deal with these differences (Zofi, 2012). This qualitative research is guided by the question, “How are selected leaders addressing the challenges of cross-cultural and virtual communication in their workplaces?” and presents the interview results of 16 selected leaders. The research investigates and analyzes the challenges, and identifies strategies and best practices that these leaders have used to address them.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to my friends who participated in the interviews for this research. I am extremely fortunate to be in touch with people who work in such prestigious positions and have had such broad and varied experiences. This thesis would not have been possible without their time and invaluable input.

Thanks to my thesis advisors, Msgr. Mahon and Dr. Widman, for their guidance and support while writing this thesis, and for their help to keep me on track throughout.

And thanks to my husband, daughter and son, for your encouragement, patience, and seeing this through with me. We did it!

## Table of Contents

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
BACKGROUND INFORMATION .....	7
RESEARCH QUESTION .....	13
OBJECTIVES/PURPOSE OF STUDY .....	13
LIMITATIONS.....	14
DEFINITION OF TERMS .....	15
<b>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>16</b>
CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION .....	16
<i>Being Psychologically Prepared.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Perception and Stereotyping.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Ethnocentrism .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Language.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Cultural Communication Styles .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Gendered Speech Patterns.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Cultural Intelligence .....</i>	<i>26</i>
VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION .....	26
<i>Building Trust .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Qualities of a Virtual Worker .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Engagement.....</i>	<i>32</i>
UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES.....	33
<b>CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF THE STUDY.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION.....</b>	<b>39</b>

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS .....	39
DETAILS OF THE ANALYSIS AND RESULTS .....	44
<i>Interview Method</i> .....	45
<i>Theme 1: Leaders are communicating Cross-Culturally and Virtually in their Workplaces         many times a day</i> .....	45
<i>Theme 2: Leaders are Resolving Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges with         Accessible Language, Follow-up Communication and by being Accommodating</i> ...	47
<i>Theme 3: Factors most Critical to Leaders working in Diverse Teams are Personal/         Cultural, Team Playing and Business Practices</i> .....	54
<i>Theme 4: As most Virtual Communication is recorded, or can be made public, Leaders         adhere to Business Practices and Communicate in this Environment with Caution</i>	58
SUMMARY .....	63
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>65</b>
OVERVIEW AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....	65
A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE .....	65
ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION.....	67
ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION.....	69
CONCLUSION .....	71
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....	72
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>74</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>79</b>
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	79
APPENDIX B: COVEY’S SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE.....	80

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A paper written by 'Knoll Workplace Research' identified major trends that have dramatically changed work and the workplace in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK). The first two major trends were identified as: (1) the move toward a more global or geographically dispersed organization; and (2) the technology that is being used to enable this (Ouye, 2011). Although these trends have been underway for more than a quarter of a century, according to a recent study, their adoption by organizations has accelerated during the recent Great Recession and are predicted to continue to do so in the future; they have "pushed alternative ways of working well past the pioneering stage and into the mainstream" (Ouye, 2011, p.1).

Many organizations of today, which were once domestic only, have transformed into multicultural, multinational, international and global organizations (Miller, 2012). This vastly widens their landscapes, now including employees, customers and clients with cultural differences, including differing languages, ages, educational levels, race, technological backgrounds, attitudes and beliefs, residence in different countries with differing infrastructures. This is compelling leaders to essentially communicate and work together in a compressed time and space mentality, across the globe, with an awareness and sensitivity to these cultural differences.

Simultaneously, organizations have seen a rapid growth in the availability of new media tools that, together with technological advancements, have been providing and constantly improving the means for this global interconnectivity to take place, within and across

organizations. Organizational communication with these new media tools is influenced and impacted by these cultural differences.

These major trends pose new challenges for leaders in the workplace, in particular with cross-cultural and virtual communication. This paper aims to investigate the challenges that leaders and employees of today are facing and how they should and are addressing them. The first chapter of this study provides background information on the last few decades of globalization; highlighting the changes that have occurred within the workplace during this time, the reasons for them, and the challenges that these trends have implied. The second chapter provides a review of the material that has been written on cross-cultural communication and virtual communication, and includes a section on understanding the challenges that leaders now face. Chapter three discusses the interviews that were developed and conducted for this study, and results of these are analyzed and discussed in the fourth chapter. The final chapter of this paper, Chapter five, summarizes the findings and inferences that were made in this study and concludes with the author's discussion and recommendations that could benefit from additional research in this area.

### **Background Information**

In an interview with N.R Narayana Murthy (2009), founder-chairman of the global software consulting company, Infosys, he defines globalization as:

- 1) Sourcing capital from where it is cheapest
- 2) Sourcing talent from where it is best available
- 3) Producing where it is most cost effective
- 4) Selling where the markets are, without being constrained by national boundaries



This definition of globalization pertinently reasons economically and makes sound business sense: globalization produces goods or services at *best value* to consumers wherever they are.

In the 1960s several developing economies, such as Hong Kong and South Korea, began to join the global market-based trading system (Sachs, 2011). In 1978 the Constitution of the People's Republic of China was promulgated and this encouraged "...the formation of rural enterprises and private businesses, liberalized foreign trade and investment...industrial production and the education of its workforce" (Hu, Khan, 1997). Since this happened, a significant phase of offshoring has been increasing. Offshoring, identified by Friedman (2005) as one of the ten forces that are flattening the world, is described as when a company moves the partial or full production of goods or service abroad (OECD, 2007). "There, it produces the very same product [or service] in the very same way, only with cheaper labor, lower taxes, subsidized energy and lower healthcare costs" (Friedman, 2005, p.115). To illustrate this continued growth of offshoring, in one single day in 2008 China exported more than it had exported throughout the entire year of 1978 (McCrum, 2010).

Following economic reforms under new leadership, India also joined the global market in 1991 and, since then, the Indian information revolution phase began; India was "churning out...some of the most gifted engineering, computer science and software talent on the globe" (Friedman, 2005, p.104). There was also global demand for this talent, especially with the millennium bug approaching in the year 2000. India took off with "outsourcing", another world flattener identified by Friedman, performing specific functions that companies were previously doing in-house, such as call center work or accounting. And because many Indians in India

spoke English, outsourcing, or ‘selecting talent from where it was best available’, was proving even easier.

Several of Friedman’s “flatteners of the world” could be broadly categorized into the technological force of globalization. The first IBM personal computer hit the markets in the early 1980s and since then this force has seen dramatic growth. PCs, fax machines, and dial-up modems all came together in the late 1980s and early 1990s and once users became aware and had access to this, the more technology began enhancing productivity at work and at home (Friedman, 2005).

Tim Berners-Lee coined the term the ‘World Wide Web’ in 1991, a system for creating, organizing and linking documents for scientists to share their research, but it wasn’t until the second half of the 1990s that web browsing became a global phenomenon; after Netscape and Windows ‘95 entered common usage and Internet usage entered the mainstream (Friedman, 2005). Companies have since invested trillions of dollars in wiring the world and this, together with fiber optic connections and other technological and software breakthroughs, enabled the world to operate as one huge global community (Friedman, 2005).

This connectivity has also enabled workers to communicate in real time wherever they are located across the globe, at minimal cost. And, as many organizations have become global, the way in which employees are communicating with one another and working together has inevitably changed. Friedman’s “Work Flow Software” flattener discusses how people have not just been connecting with other people, but have been working and collaborating with each other. Everyone’s applications are now connected with everyone else’s applications and so ‘work flow’ (design, create, buy and sell) can be performed here, there and everywhere across the globe (Friedman, 2005).

As discussed, although technology has existed in the workplace for several decades, improvements to devices, Internet connectivity, and, more recently, Web 2.0 technologies have heavily impacted the way in which we use technology at work today. Web 2.0 describes a “set of next-generation Internet technologies...encouraging users to manipulate and interact with content in new ways...[and have] pushed computing power off the desktop and onto the Internet” (Wolcott, 2007). The most significant changes in technology usage in the work place are the collaborative tools that are enabling workers to virtually work together asynchronously. Employees can check in and respond to message threads and collectively work on documents, as their schedules allow. For example, students of online courses at universities in the US and UK can collaborate and share knowledge and information using collaborative tools, such as Blackboard Discussion. Other newer technology tools, such as video and audio conferencing, micro-blogging, wikis and instant messaging, have also eased their way into work practices, allowing employees to also collaborate and interact synchronously or simultaneously. So, although the people working together in such a way may not ever meet each other face to face, they can regularly ‘meet’ each other via video conferencing or virtual meetings.

There has also been a continuous progression in multipurpose devices, which have constantly become more miniaturized, more powerful, more functional and cheaper (Friedman, 2005). This, as put by Friedman, is due to the “steroids” that have been amplifying communication capabilities. We are now communicating and working in a digital, mobile, wireless and virtual way more than we could have ever imagined. Today, an employee based almost anywhere can have the means to “access work materials and interact with colleagues on a 24/7 basis, all one needs is a smart phone or any other wired device that reaches the Internet”

(Ouye, 2011, p.3). There is no longer an “away from my desk” scenario; your desk can travel with you wherever you go.

Offshoring, outsourcing, Internet connectivity and Web 2.0 technologies have allowed organizations to operate more cost effectively, reducing the cost of locations, non-direct costs, and increasing access to skilled workers (Ouye, 2011). This is also necessary to organizations today, as physical space in certain locations has become very expensive. Last year, in 2012, London became “the world’s most expensive city for office space, according to a survey of 126 major cities” (Barnato, 2013). The property agency that performed the survey, DTZ, found that companies were annually paying an average of \$23,500 per worker to locate in office space in the West End of London (Barnato, 2013). Although most employees still commute to and from traditional centralized offices, high location costs in cities such as London are forcing organizations to consider nontraditional work spaces, such as satellite offices, offshore offices and telework from home. A research study forecast that by 2016, 63 million Americans would telecommute at least occasionally from home, which would represent 43% of all US workers (Ouye, 2011). Another study indicated that white-collar workers would be spending an average of 30% of their time working remotely out of a central office, an increase of 50% since 2011 (Ouye, 2011).

Working in non-traditional work spaces has also reduced travel costs for organizations – as much as \$100 million for a \$10 billion company – and some organizations are reducing the square footage allocated to the individual employee (Ouye, 2011). For example, Narinder Sundar is currently involved in a “hot-desking” project in the UK called “Work Styles”, whereby certain employees will no longer have their own physical desk or area, but instead share it with

their work colleagues. Face-to-face meetings can now be held using remote technologies, and organizations are combining centralized offices with alternative workplace programs.

Organizations of today have become more distributed across the globe, and are being represented by a “complex web of employees, suppliers and customers both collocated and dispersed around the world” (Ouye, 2011, p.2). As working and interacting with people has become across national boundaries, it is inevitable that communicating now involves interactions with people who have differing cultural backgrounds, values and languages. McCrum (2010) writes of how “Globish” has become the World’s universal language. And whilst the majority of Internet users have access to limitless unrestricted information, China, with government control and intervention, prohibits “free searches” as this is deemed ‘not appropriate’ in their culture (McCrum, 2010).

The ‘Generation 2020’ will soon be entering the workplace, those who were born after 1997, the “digital natives” whose lives have consisted with the Internet from birth, and those workers will be communicating very differently than just a few decades ago. Analysts are still working out the common characteristics of this group, but words that are being used now are: connected, concerned, careful and collaborative. Leaders are warned “to work effectively with these young workers, you will have to be prepared to understand, and become part of, their network” (Klobucher, 2011).

In addition, US demographics have dramatically changed in the past few decades and employees in organizations are increasingly from very different cultures. Caucasian-Americans in the US are a decreasing percentage, and it is estimated that by 2050 they will become a minority (Miller, 2012). The population in general is also living longer and it is anticipated that by 2050, more than 20% of the US population will be 65 or older (Miller, 2012). These

changing demographics are reflected in the US workforce and can create new challenges for leaders. Leaders need to obtain cultural knowledge and must be trained to establish skills in order to communicate effectively with their employees and stakeholders, cross-culturally and virtually.

### **Research Question**

This paper is guided by the question: “How are selected leaders in the US and UK addressing the challenges of cross-cultural and virtual communication in their workplaces?”

### **Objectives/Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the changes and challenges that have arisen in the organizational landscape, as lived by a selected group of leaders in the US and the UK. The changes and challenges that leaders are now facing in the workplace will be studied, and the literature that is available to mitigate issues with cross-cultural and/or virtual communication will be summarized. It is becoming an increasing demand of leaders to create a sense of relatedness and alignment when working in this recent organizational landscape, and this study aims to provide leaders or future leaders with sound advice and guidance on leading culturally diverse and/or global teams.

The study also aims to provide the author with personal preparation for returning to the “corporate” workplace, after a ten-year break, and having a career aspiration of obtaining a leadership role. The author will obtain primary research from selected leaders who are facing such issues in the workplace today, and provide a personal angle in the fifth chapter based on her experience with different cultures and background.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited to a select group of leaders who are currently employed in the US or UK and are experiencing, or have recently experienced, cross-cultural and virtual communication in their workplaces. The study is limited to communication that is used for work-related purposes, and will not include cross-cultural or virtual communication used for social purposes. The study is limited to English speaking leaders, who will base their responses on their own memories of past events and perspectives. As such, there is no assurance that this is a representative group of corporate managers and, thus, generalizations should not be drawn from the results of the study. Linguistics, psychology and technological tools will not be studied in detail for this paper.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attitude:** A state of mind or an emotion toward a person or situation; a tendency to behave in one way or another (Samovar, 2000).

**Belief:** A personally held conviction in the truth of a statement or in the existence of something.

Beliefs are strongly affected by culture and are learned (Samovar, 2000).

**Culture:** Shared values and perspectives of a group of people conditioned by similar education and experiences (Samovar, 2000).

**Cultural Intelligence:** A person's capability to adapt to new cultural contexts (Ang, Earley, 2003).

**Cross-cultural communication:** Communication across individuals who are culturally different from each other. (Harris, Moran & Moran, 2004).

**Ethnocentrism:** Belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture; it may be accompanied by a feeling of contempt for those considered as foreign (Harris et al., 2004).

**Leadership:** The process of influencing others to understand and agree what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives (Dool, 2012).

**Perception:** The process by which you become aware of objects and events in the external world (Samovar, 2000).

**Values:** The evaluative components of our beliefs and attitudes (Samovar, 2000).

**Virtual Communication:** Communication via the Internet, mediated by new information technologies, such as emails, video conferencing or social networking (Papa, n.d.).



## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Cross-Cultural Communication**

The previous chapter discussed that, due to globalization, organizations are being represented by an increasingly complex and diverse workforce. But Liswood (2010) explains that organizations may not be reaping the full benefits from this diversity if they are merely consisting of a diverse workforce. She uses the biblical Noah's Ark parable as an analogy to illustrate this: An organization that includes a diverse workforce, one that includes "at least two of every kind" may not be at an advantage; while the 'giraffes' see themselves as having elegant long necks, beautiful brown and white spots and carefully choosing to eat only the finest leaves and bark, they may look at the 'zebras' and think that they are odd looking, with foolishly short necks, silly stripes, and eat what looks like garbage. And, in an organization like this, the 'rabbits' and the 'coyotes' cannot even be in the same room!

The most important leadership qualities in terms of employee satisfaction are trust, confidence and effective communication (Dool, 2012). As organizations of today have become globally dispersed consisting of increasingly broader cultural groups, this can pose further challenges for leaders to satisfy their employees. Eighty-five per cent of *Fortune* 500 companies did not think they had an "adequate number of global leaders", and "100% of CEOs surveyed cited the need for training and education to help their companies achieve diversity goals" (Dool, 2012). There appears to be an unquestionable need to create effective cross-cultural leaders in today's multi-cultural organizations, especially as a recent study found that current diversity training is ineffective (Vedantam, 2008) and also because a large number of corporate 'expat' assignments fail (Dool, 2012).

Liswood (2010) advises that leaders need to come up with plans for integrating this diversity, to benefit from the long necks and the stripes, instead of waiting for organization-wide conformity. Diversity issues will continue until “everyone in the workplace learns and understands that their own inherent behaviors and unconscious approaches are likely hindering success for everyone. In a true meritocracy, the benefit of diversity will emerge only when we become aware and conscious of how we feel about the other...It will occur when we become aware of the subtle ways in which some in the ark are advantaged while others are disadvantaged...Only then can we understand how the beliefs, roles, shoulds, should nots, values...that we bring into the workplace affect one another” (Liswood, 2010, p.3).

This section will discuss the literature found regarding inherent behaviors and unconscious approaches that leaders should be aware of and understand in order to address cross-cultural communication issues in the workplace.

### **Being Psychologically Prepared**

In order to become a multicultural leader and effective cross-cultural communicator, self-assessment and self-awareness of one’s culture, ethnicity, identity, and privileges is required. Thomas (2000) advises that this is a key step toward “psychological readiness”; leaders who have given thought to their identity and ethnicity and are interested in their own culture will, in effect, become interested in those of others.

“Psychological privileges are not physical, tangible assets like money, nor do they accrue with education...they are often bestowed upon members of the norm, and these privileges provide invisible and ignored hidden advantages, especially within the world of work” (Thomas, 2000). For example, in the year 2000 within the American cultural context, being a [tall] white, middle class, male heterosexual provided privileges that are often taken for granted within

members of this group (Thomas, 2000). Individuals who have examined and come to recognize the psychological privileges they possess or that have existed for them, and how the lack of these privileges may disadvantage others who are from different cultural groups, will become “newly accountable” and free to “get on with the task at hand rather than focus on their identity in relationship to the identities of others” (Thomas, 2000). Communication in the workplace is incorporated with impressions of our beliefs, perceptions, understanding, perspectives and behaviors from increasingly different cultures, so leaders must be more conscious and aware of where their own actions and behaviors derive from in order to become psychologically prepared for intercultural success.

### **Perception and Stereotyping**

Our perception is based on physiological factors, past experiences, roles, culture and our present feelings and circumstances; and, therefore, can be prone to errors. The process of perception involves observation, interpretation and evaluation or judgment (Zarndt, 2010).

We can make perceptual assumptions at work and with staff that may be based on inaccuracies or stereotypes. For example, a common stereotype for Asians is that they are intelligent, clannish, arrogant and technical. Even though we are all unique individuals, we are also members of cultural groups that our knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and values are based on (Samovar, 2000). But when stereotypes do not match the reality of a situation, they can negatively impact work relationships.

“The real problem lies in the manager’s assumptions” (Liswood, 2010, p.77), and Liswood offers leaders practical advice on identifying “dominant groups” and “non-dominant groups”, leveling the playing field for these groups, and obtaining “conscious awareness” in organizations. Liswood (2010) urges leaders to move beyond mere diversity by realizing the

unconscious perceptions or biases they may hold and by understanding the dimensions and dynamics of cultures.

### **Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentric leaders are rigid in their acceptance of same or similar cultures they are from, but equally rigid in their rejection of differing cultures (Thomas, 2000). They are unable to step outside of their own cultural frame of reference and, rather than attempt to understand the pervasive influence of culture or race, they may harshly judge people from other cultures whose language, ideals, opinions, and customs may not fit with their own (Thomas, 2000).

Conversely, allocentric leaders understand and appreciate the differences that exist across cultures, and aim to capitalize on the unique insights a person's culture may provide in various work situations. They "try to make causal attributions about someone that fit within that person's cultural norms and values" by understanding various ethnic perspectives, without attaching value or judgment (Thomas, 2000).

Knowledge alone of cultural differences does not eliminate ethnocentrism and, in some cases, it may actually reinforce ethnocentrism; however, understanding conditioned cultural values, behaviors and perspectives can help leaders to develop their cross-cultural competencies and communication skills.

### **Language**

International business executives perceive language differences to be the primary reason for difficulty in cross-cultural communication, followed by the concept of time and telephone etiquette (Chaney, Martin, 2012). With 97% of international communication in English, leaders who speak it as a first language are advised to put extra effort into learning other culture's communication customs and etiquette, and this is difficult without first understanding the

language (Chaney, Martin, 2012). Lindsell-Roberts (2011) advises leaders to “be attuned to language differences, even if your team speaks English...learn some of their language” (p.194). Understanding how the other culture’s language is structured, and how people converse socially and in business situations, will help leaders to communicate more effectively cross-culturally.

The structural and semantic aspects of language are both involved with culture: the structural aspect includes phonetics and syntax, which is influenced by perception; and, the semantic aspect of language deals with meaning (Chaney, Martin 2012). Even similar languages, such as Spanish and Portuguese, still represent different social realities and the more differences found between languages the more difficult it becomes to understand thought patterns and to explain something to someone from a different culture (Chaney, Martin, 2012).

Across the globe, common language between people can be unifying and bring people together, yet the presence of different languages can be divisive. Although most people in the US and UK speak English, and may not speak the languages of their ancestors, many thought patterns have been passed through generations, such as how a person greets family, friends or work colleagues. For example, a simple question used in the Philippines is “Where are you going?” or in China is “Have you eaten?” and are asked as ritual greetings and not used as requests for real information (Liswood, 2011). People who continue to speak their native language find it easier to express their thoughts in this linguistic environment as it is their conceptual framework to explain ideas and opinions, and linguists closely examine this. Language determines cognition and perception, and shapes a person’s experience, as well as being a device for expressing this (Chaney, Martin, 2012).

In the US and UK, there are several types of informal languages that are used; however, using such languages with people who are unfamiliar with their meanings can cause

communication problems. Chaney and Martin (2012) identify five types of informal languages that are used in English: slang, jargon, provincialisms, acronyms, and euphemisms. (Argot and cant are considered alternative languages used by US co-cultures.)

**Slang.** “Abused English”. Informal non-standard vocabulary that may consist of figures of speech, arbitrarily coined terms or invented words. Although slang expressions are coined by teenagers, adults also invent them. For example, computer users may use expressions such as “spike”, to describe a sudden increase in voltage, or “asleep at the switch” could be used to describe someone who is inattentive.

**Jargon.** Technical terminology used by people in specific professions or occupational groups. For example, financial groups may use expressions such as “red ink” meaning a financial loss or “bottom line” meaning the actual price.

**Provincialisms.** Expressions or colloquialisms used by people in specific region. For example, some regions use “y’all” to mean “you all” or “pop” for soda. Pronunciation also differs across the US and UK regionally.

**Acronyms.** Words formed from the initial letters of words in a phrase spoken as one word. For example, VAT for value added tax or COD for cash on delivery.

**Euphemisms.** Inoffensive expressions substituted for expressions that may otherwise seem offensive or harsh. For example, “to pass away” is a euphemism for “to die”.

Leaders must be aware of the language that they are using in the workplace, as it may be the cause of miscommunication. Chaney and Martin provide guidelines that have been developed to decrease misunderstanding between people not speaking a language on the same level. Some of these are listed below:

- Avoid slang and sports terms

- Use short, simple sentences
- Choose words with only one meaning. Avoid uncommon words.
- Use single-word action verbs
- Be aware of words within the same language that change meanings between cultures
- Conform to rules of grammar
- Use the formal tone and correct punctuation
- Use the other country's salutation and closing; avoid using first names in salutations
- Adapt the tone to the other person and try to capture the flavor of the language
- Avoid acronyms, emoticons, and abbreviations in writing letters, faxes, or email messages

A *Harvard Business Review* article advises that leaders should choose their global staff for their task expertise and not their fluency in English; obviously, a certain level of understanding is required, "but whether they're thickly accented or not is not so much the point. It's easy to forget that" (Bloch, Whiteley, 2009, p.90).

### **Cultural Communication Styles**

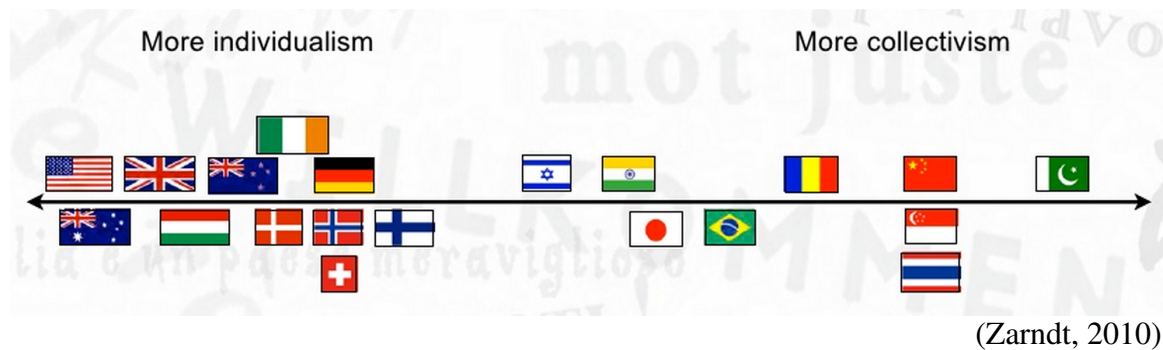
Lojeski and Reilly (2007) mention that people from different cultures will have different styles of communication. For example, the Chinese "...generally uphold a collectivist culture with a high degree of social distance, and they are often reluctant to ask clarifying questions for fear of 'losing face'. People in the US, on the other hand, are generally individualists, give very little thought to rank or affiliation, and are unafraid to ask any number of clarifying questions" (Lojeski, Reilly, 2007, p.8). These styles are analyzed and discussed below.

**High/Low Context.** High context cultural groups are relatively homogenous, and tend to communicate in indirect, subtle and non-verbal ways and use metaphors, innuendo and

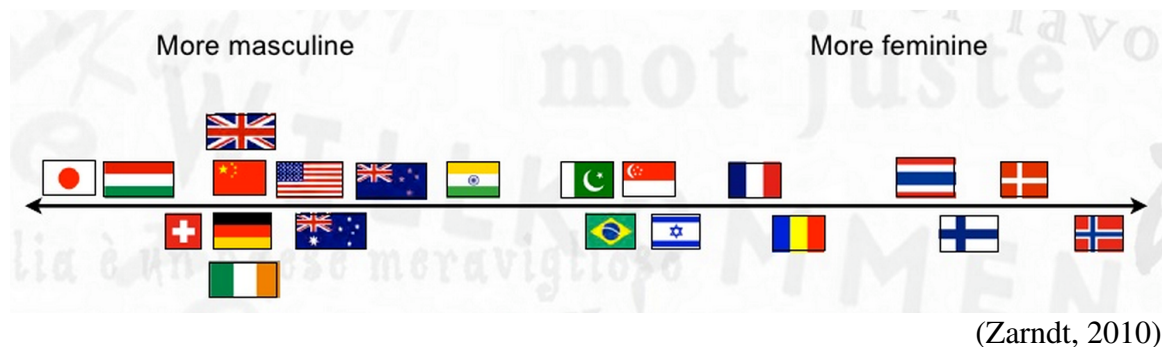




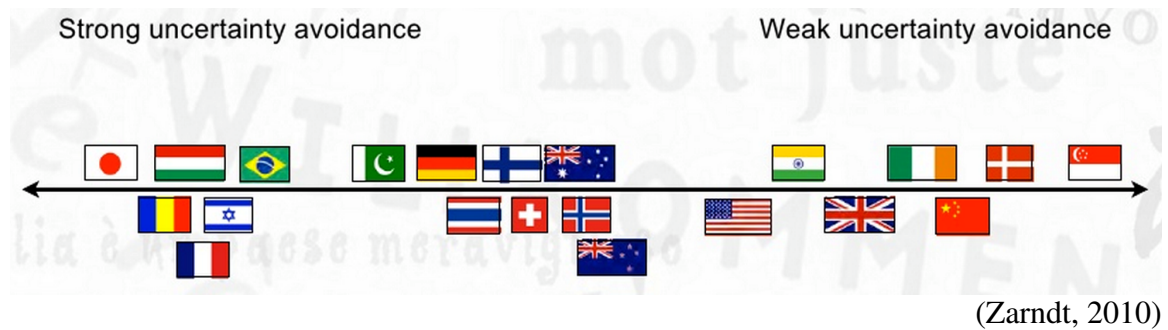
cultures form family-like groups, and collaborate and respect each other with a “we” mindset, and take more responsibility for each other.



**Masculinity.** High masculinity in cultures value traditional male and female roles, where men are expected to be tough, the provider, assertive and strong and women are expected to work in the home or have separate professions from men. In low masculinity cultures, those expectations of roles are blurred.

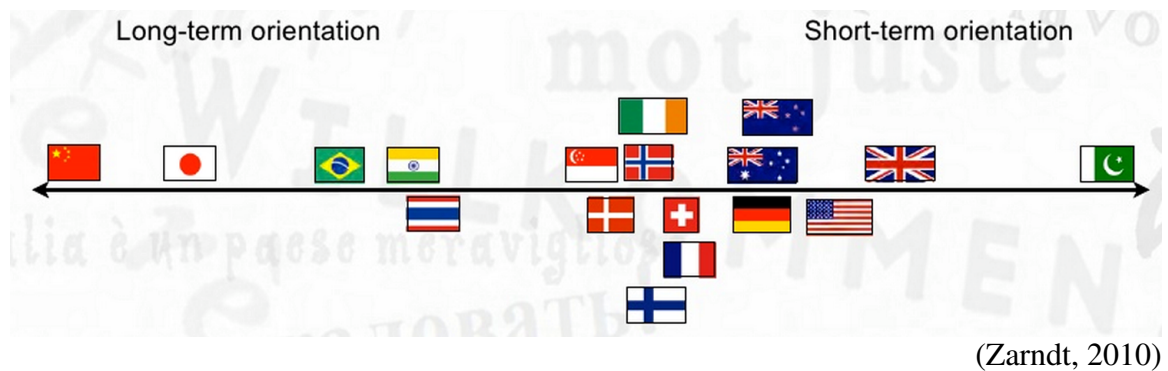


**Uncertainty Avoidance.** Cultures with high or strong uncertainty avoidance seek truth and avoid ambiguous situations. Low or weak uncertainty cultures have very few rules and people are discouraged to discover their own truth.



**Long-Term Orientation.** Hofstede later added this dimension to his initial list as some cultures have a stronger link to philosophies that are different to western cultures.

Cultures with more long-term orientation avoid “loss of face” and have stronger social obligations.



### Gendered Speech Patterns

Gendered speech patterns are merely the way in which an individual has been encouraged or learned to speak. Tannen (1990, 1994) analyzed the differences between the ways each gender communicates and her work suggested that men tend to be more direct speakers, while women are more often indirect.

Direct speaking is more transactional and focuses on the information being transmitted, and tends to use more succinct, declarative, and definitive sentences. Indirect speaking focuses on the relationships between the two people communicating, ensuring that everyone is included,

and tends to use more lengthy or detailed sentences. Liswood (2010) and Tannen (1990, 1994) both found that gendered speech patterns exist within most, if not all, cultural groups.

### **Cultural Intelligence**

Cultural intelligence can be defined as someone's ability to adapt successfully to a different cultural group, by using observation, empathy and intelligence to read people and situations. Those with high cultural intelligence become attuned to the values, beliefs, attitudes and body language of the cultural group, and make informed decisions about behaviors and actions, and adapt their own behavior accordingly.

Cultural intelligence is not innate; Thomas and Inkson (2004) claim that the non-linear process of developing cultural intelligence involves knowledge, mindfulness and acquiring the right skills. Leaders can develop four components in order to become culturally intelligent:

***Drive.*** Being motivated to learn about a new culture or setting

***Knowledge.*** Studying how culture shapes people's behaviors, values and beliefs.

***Strategy.*** Being able to factor culture into longer-term planning.

***Action.*** Behaving in a culturally sensitive way, and being able to 'think on one's feet' in difficult situations (Mindtools, n.d.).

### **Virtual Communication**

Contrary to background information in the first chapter, in February 2013, the Internet Company Yahoo announced to its employees that they would no longer be permitted to telecommute (Nusca, 2013). To date, Yahoo had been among the forerunners of "connectivity" as "as way to free its employees from their desks...to attract workers in the first place"; so an announcement like this had obviously created some consternation amongst its employees, especially those who were employed on the basis of this work flexibility (Nusca, 2013). Jackie

Reses, head of Human Resources at Yahoo reasoned in her memo to staff that, as “communication and collaboration will be important”, employees “need to be working side-by-side...it is critical that we are all present in our offices” (Swisher, 2013). She also explained, “speed and quality are often sacrificed” when telecommuting or working virtually and, in order to be “one Yahoo”, employees must start by “physically being together” (Swisher, 2013).

In response to this decision, one Yahoo employee wrote, “...it’s outrageous and a morale killer” (Swisher, 2013). But Nusca (2013) argues that the decision was made for the interest of the whole company ahead of the interests of the individual worker, and claims that it “is alienation and isolation...that are culture-sapping morale killers”. Clearly, Yahoo has a greater task at hand before it can offer such work flexibilities to its employees; nevertheless, it seems that the reason for this decision has stemmed from, or has been made worse by, virtual communication challenges in the workplace.

Yet despite Yahoo’s recent decision to forbid teleworking, Sheridan (2012) argues that allowing employees to work “virtually” is the best option when companies want greater business success. He believes that organizations consisting of teams working remotely and virtually is a great fit for global business and allows them to recruit some of the most talented employees across the globe (Sheridan, 2012).

A 2003 report by the ‘International Association of Business Communicators’ Research Foundation reviews and summarizes research literature of almost 100 articles that were then found on the subject of virtual communication. This meta-analysis was guided by five questions that related to communication channels, identification, and cultural diversity in virtual communication. Although the findings were mixed, the report concluded that training can enhance the effectiveness of communication technologies for communication in the workplace in

three broad areas: (1) the differences between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication (or virtual communication); (2) increasing the use of virtual communication to build trust and commitment and increase self-efficacy; and (3) managing gender and cultural differences (Mayer-Guell, Kandath, Oetzel, Rogers, 2003).

In his book, Sheridan (2012) explains the “new way of doing business” as virtual teams, and provides advice for mitigating issues in the workplace in those three areas above. He recommends that leaders focus on three areas to promote successful virtual team working: building trust, obtaining the right characteristics and qualities in virtual workers, and ensuring positive engagement with them (Sheridan, 2012). These areas are discussed below.

### **Building Trust**

“Trust is an absolute prerequisite” in virtual teams, and Bloch and Whiteley (2009) identify building trust as one of their ten strategies for managing in a flat world. But “building trust can be far more difficult virtually than face-to-face” (Ubell, 2010, p.54) and this poses further challenges for the virtual leader: the lack of face-to-face interaction and communication, “where the transference of emotion takes place and a genuine liking and respect develops” is removed (Covey, 2008). Research has suggested that remote working can cause feelings of isolation in workers; however, this is heavily influenced by their leaders (Busch, Nash & Bell 2011). Lindsell-Roberts (2011) believes that a strong virtual team starts with strong leadership, involving “trust, communication and striking a careful balance between autonomy and accountability” and, even though lack of communication and miscommunication are on-going problems in traditional workplaces, when distance is added to the equation the challenges are intensified (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011, p.186).

Encouraging trust among virtual teams cultivates a remote culture of freedom and autonomy and, when possible, should start to take place from the process of hiring (Sheridan, 2012) or at the onset of a project. Lojeski and Reilly (2007) suggest having initial team meetings that could act as introductory sessions and relationship building exercises to help create trust within the team. Even though the cost of holding such a meeting may be very high (e.g. travel costs, hotel costs), “having team members get together initially will avoid many problems, including higher costs, missed deadlines, and other adverse financial situations” in the future (Lojeski, Reilly, 2007). Such meetings can indicate team members’ future behavior and mannerisms online, and identify “ambassadors” to represent geographic locations. Ambassadors “understand the cultural, organizational, sociological, and relationship factors that impact virtual distance” and these team members will help to better manage virtual relationships across cultural diversity (Lojeski, Reilly, 2007).

Due to time and budgetary restraints, however, initial face-to-face meetings are not always possible, and several leaders believe that building trust with virtual workers is no different than building trust with workers in the same location (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011). Brad Williams, Director of Marketing at TiVo, ensures that all team members’ skill sets are broadcasted to the team, and he often uses conference calls or web-based conferences to make this introduction. He includes personal information, such as hobbies and interests, successes and personal achievements to “unify the team” and realize the value of their team members (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011). Other leaders encourage interoffice visits, regular reviews, detailed feedback, and SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-bound) goals (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011).

Building trust amongst a virtual team will take time but the stronger the trust established within virtual teams, the better they are able to communicate effectively (Bloch, Whiteley (2009). A leader, who follows through, is “visible” to his virtual team members, and proactive in promoting two-way communication will help build trust in virtual teams; but ultimately, the virtual leader must expose and offer his trust in order for it to be returned (Sheridan, 2012).

### **Qualities of a Virtual Worker**

Not all team members will be suited to virtual team working. Sheridan (2012) warns leaders that the best virtual workers are definitely not the ones with the strongest desire to work from home or remotely, as this is not an indicator of their commitment or professionalism to their role. He contends, “many of the predictors of employee engagement in a virtual position are no different from the predictors of employee engagement in a position on site” and that passion, loyalty, applicable skills and knowledge are all essential characteristics for the virtual worker (Sheridan, 2012, p.18).

Lindsell-Roberts (2011) lists that the virtual worker must be “able to work independently... highly organized, with good time management skills, adept in multitasking, confident in decision making abilities, diligent about meeting deadlines and able to work under pressure, able to troubleshoot basic problems, resourceful, capable of quickly grasping and applying new concepts, able to use and adapt to mainstream technology” (p.196). Many of these skills coincide with and could be categorized within Sheridan’s (2012) four “self characteristics” that are essential for virtual workers, discussed below.

**Self-starters** hold three common attributes: firstly, they seek work at all times and do not require external stimuli to stay on task; secondly, they assume responsibility and contribution

and perform as consummate professionals; and, lastly, self-starters complete their work and see tasks through to the end (Sheridan, 2012).

**Self-motivated** virtual workers demonstrate key competencies: they are single-minded, can remain focused despite distractions, and have an extraordinary sense of purpose; they also try new ideas and strategies to accomplish their goals and are life-long learners. They do not require the intellectual stimulation readily available in work-related settings (such as conversations or impromptu brainstorming sessions over lunch) and constantly self-evaluate their skill-sets and pursue new opportunities (Sheridan, 2012).

**Self-disciplined** virtual workers are organized individuals who can forego immediate pleasure or gratification in favor of accomplishing their goals or more meaningful outcomes. They are masters of time management by applying structure to not only their time but also their physical workspace (Sheridan, 2012). For example, a mother who is a self-disciplined virtual worker will allocate an office area in her home, ensure her equipment and space is laid out well, and will schedule certain hours in the day for certain tasks, some of which may need to be done in the evening when her children are in bed.

**Self-sufficient** virtual workers are independent workers who typically need little assistance or guidance, and do not rely on coworkers for morale boosts. They are highly effective communicators and are “self confident and remarkably adept at assessing their own performance” (Sheridan, 2012, p. 56). They also have the ability to see themselves as part of the overall plan and know how they fit into that plan and the team’s objectives (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011).



## Engagement

As well as virtual workers possessing the four 'self characteristics' discussed above, the successful virtual worker must be engaged. Sheridan (2012) describes this engagement as a 'magnetic culture'; the connection, intellectual commitment and emotional bond (pride, passion, enthusiasm) that employees possess to the organization they work for. He identifies three levels of engagement in virtual workers: actively engaged, ambivalent and actively disengaged.

The ideal virtual worker is actively engaged, exceptionally dedicated and is largely driven by their job, provided they are doing what they do best and are utilizing their skillset and abilities. Ambivalent virtual workers just do enough to get by, usually logging on and off at their exact designated hours; they are primarily motivated by their paycheck and rarely communicate virtually unless they are prompted to. Actively disengaged virtual workers feel little if any connection to the organization; they are disorganized and are known for their 'virtual absenteeism', log on and pretend to work but spend their time sending joke emails, surreptitiously gossiping or complaining on phone calls or doing completely unrelated activities to work (Sheridan, 2012).

Regardless of their location, virtual workers' engagement levels will influence and affect one another. For example, ambivalent virtual workers will adopt positive attitudes if they work and communicate within a team of actively engaged virtual workers; but Sheridan (2012) warns, "Disengaged employees are the cancer of an organization. Their attitudes and behaviors will literally infect those in contact with them..." (p.85).

Since international statistics show that 73% of the workforce is not actively engaged, Sheridan (2012) stresses the importance of educating virtual workers on engagement and recommends regularly assessing their engagement levels, such as initiating discussion on

engagement in performance evaluations. HR Solutions' Research Institute identifies ten key drivers that impact engagement levels in virtual workers: recognition, career development, leadership abilities, strategy & mission, job content, senior management's relationship with employees, open & effective communication, coworker satisfaction, resources and organizational structure & core/shared values (Sheridan, 2012). The research found a strong correlation between effective communication and engagement: leaders who openly and frequently communicated with their virtual workers resulted in higher engagement levels from them. It is therefore crucial that leaders keep their virtual workers informed as well as keep a closer on their engagement levels; the "no news is good news" is completely false when managing the virtual worker" (Sheridan, 2012, p.124).

### **Understanding the Challenges**

Traditional leadership skills have been based on the assumption that their workers are located just down the hall, that they are all working there at the same time, and that they share a common culture (Fisher, Fisher, 2000). But increased diversity together with virtual work is an expansion of any work place, where communication bridges the gap and should be effective, comprehensive, frequent, timely and thoughtful (Sheridan, 2012). Since workers with different backgrounds, styles and languages now 'work at the same table', in the absence of physical cues such as facial expressions and gestures, leaders of such teams are challenged to create a smooth operation despite the many differences at play. The possibilities for misunderstandings and cultural blunders can be magnified in these work situations, and leaders would benefit from expanding their own tools and techniques to deal with these cross-cultural and virtual concerns (Zofi, 2012). Clearly, new leadership strategies and techniques are needed and by having sensitivity, being flexible and understanding the differences that may exist in worldviews,

communication styles, ethics and etiquette, leaders can help to mitigate issues that may arise in their teams (Zofi, 2012).

Despite technology being the “lifeline of the virtual team, its essence still focuses on people and places” (Zofi, 2012, p.4). The most effective virtual teams are built on a foundation of open and effective communication (Sheridan, 2012), and leaders must be agile and demonstrate “how to be a virtual team...and to create ways to make the working of the virtual team visible to itself” (Kimball, 1997).

Cross-cultural and virtual workers need the leadership that all workers need: a clear mission, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, that all team members are aligned with, and two-way communication options (Kimball, 1997). Successful and trusted partnerships within these teams can be built by “careful selection, setting clear expectations, and following up with team members in a proactive and positive manner” (Lindsell-Roberts, 2011, p.187).

“Technology is a great servant but a bad master” (Covey, 2008); therefore, leaders must evaluate and select the right tools so that their inherent leadership skills can be communicated to each and every team member. Given that open and effective communication is critical in fostering a culture of engagement with workers, leaders must use the most effective and preferred tools to communicate. As a general rule, Sheridan (2012) recommends marrying the level of complexity of the message with the level of complexity of the tool. For example, a basic notification is best served by a simple email; more complex messages, “which might demand interaction or the need to address concerns or answer questions, is far better suited to a video conference or Webinar” (Sheridan, 2012, p.144).

Although the new leader today may face cross-cultural and virtual issues in today’s vast organizational landscape, it is apparent from much of the literature reviewed that leaders must

now use their communication skills as a means of connecting, interacting and integrating with their diverse workforce (Zofi, 2012).

### **Chapter 3: Design of the Study**

This qualitative research study will interview a sample of 15 selected leaders based on the following criterion:

- The leaders will be based in the US or UK
- The leaders will be previously known to the author
- The leaders will have differing levels of experience in leadership, in terms of years in leadership or seniority within their positions
- All leaders will have had extensive cross-cultural or virtual communication experience at work

The author will ask the sample a total of ten questions and the interview will be divided into two sections: the first five questions will be based on the leaders' actual experiences of cross-cultural communication and the following five questions will be based on their understanding and actual experiences of virtual communication. The author will choose to conduct the interview in a semi-structured format including structured questions, in order to obtain factual or similar kinds of information, and also open-ended questions, in order to encourage the sample to provide details relating to their beliefs, feelings and behaviors. For example, structured questions will include asking the frequency the leader communicates cross-culturally or virtually, which training they have completed on diversity management or cross-cultural communication at work, and which tools they are using to communicate virtually. Open-ended questions will include, for example, asking the difficulties the leader has encountered when communicating cross-culturally and virtually, and how they are addressing or overcoming these challenges. The complete list of questions used to interview the sample can be found in Appendix A.

The questions will be emailed to the sample during the summer of 2013, prior to conducting the interviews, so that the sample can prepare their answers to the questions beforehand. The interviews will take place in the author's home or at a mutually convenient and agreed upon location; all will be conducted in English. Each interview is expected to last no more than one hour; the average length of each interview is expected to last 30 minutes. All interviews are hoped to be carried out face-to-face, in person (and possibly using an audio recorder if consent is given); however, it may be necessary to conduct some interviews virtually, using video conferencing, or by phone. As a last resort, the sample will be asked to email their answers if other forms of communication are not possible. Regardless of the method used to conduct the interview, all answers will be incorporated into the analysis and the method of communication will be noted.

Interviews will be kept anonymous but the author will select a broad group of leaders in terms of age, the number of years of experience they have at work, the number of years of experience they have had in a leadership role, level of leadership, professional field, financial income, and ethnic origin. The author will also attempt to select an equal balance of male and female leaders, and to select some leaders whose first language is not English. As English may not be the first language of some leaders, the author will use simple, clear language and may provide more description or examples to further explain the interview questions.

It is hoped that the sample will represent a broad and diverse segment of leaders, who will provide broader and more diverse responses to the questions, which will add depth to the analysis of the results in the next chapter. The author does not intend to include "extremists" (Leedy, Ormrod, 2013) in the sample who may answer in extreme measures. The author will consider the cultural backgrounds of the sample and how this could influence their responses.

For example, Western individuals may be more forthcoming with discussing difficulties in the workplace in comparison to Asian individuals. The author will be sensitive to this, and may experiment with multiple ways of asking for information.

Results of the interviews will aim to identify the current issues the sample is facing in their workplaces today with cross-cultural and virtual communication, the frequency of this communication, and to investigate the steps the sample is taking to mitigate these issues. The differing cultural backgrounds of the sample and the differing methods of communication used to conduct the interview (i.e. face-to-face as opposed to virtual or over the phone) may provide additional information that could be analyzed in the next chapter.

It should be noted that as the author will be asking questions about past events and perspectives, the sample will be relying on their own memories, which is subject to considerable distortion. Samples can be “apt to recall what might or should have happened (based on their attitudes or beliefs) rather than what actually did happen” (Leedy, Ormrod, 2013). Sample responses can be intentionally dishonest (about their attitudes, feelings and motives), and should be treated as perceptions rather than as facts. The author will seek to substantiate the responses obtained by the sample by observing their behavior and mannerisms whilst conducting the interview.

The interview will be flexible and it is expected that, for this reason, it may yield some additional or different information that the author had not planned for. The author will establish and maintain rapport throughout the interview, without revealing her own perceptions and reactions that may influence the sample.

## **Chapter 4: Data Presentation**

This study involved interviewing selected leaders about their experiences of cross-cultural and virtual communication in their workplaces. The study aimed to investigate how leaders are addressing the challenges of cross-cultural and virtual communication and also aimed to identify strategies to address these challenges.

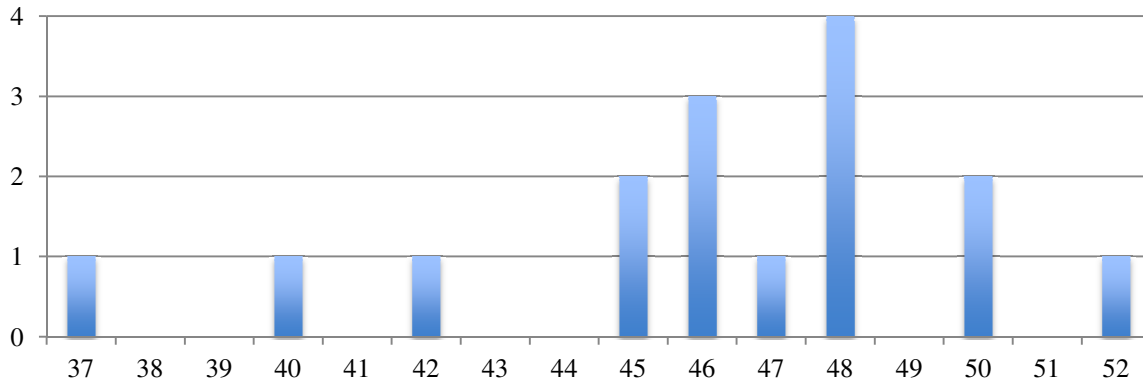
This chapter presents the data collected from the sample interviewed. The interview questions (appendix A) were emailed to all respondents before the actual interview was conducted to allow the respondents to prepare their answers. The sample consisted of 16 respondents of differing age, nationality, position at work, etc. and all respondents agreed to answer demographic questions prior to the interview. The 'Respondent Demographics' section of this chapter presents relevant demographic factors of the sample. The chapter then presents the 'Details of the Analysis and Results' from the data collection, in the form of four thematic findings. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of results.

### **Respondent Demographics**

#### **Age and Gender**

Eight males and eight females were interviewed, providing a 50:50 gender balance. Respondents' age ranged from 37 years old to 52 years old; the average age of the respondent was 46 years old. Female respondents' age ranged from 37 years old to 52 years old; the average age of female respondent was 47. Male respondents' age ranged from 40 years old to 50 years old; the average age of the male respondent was 45.



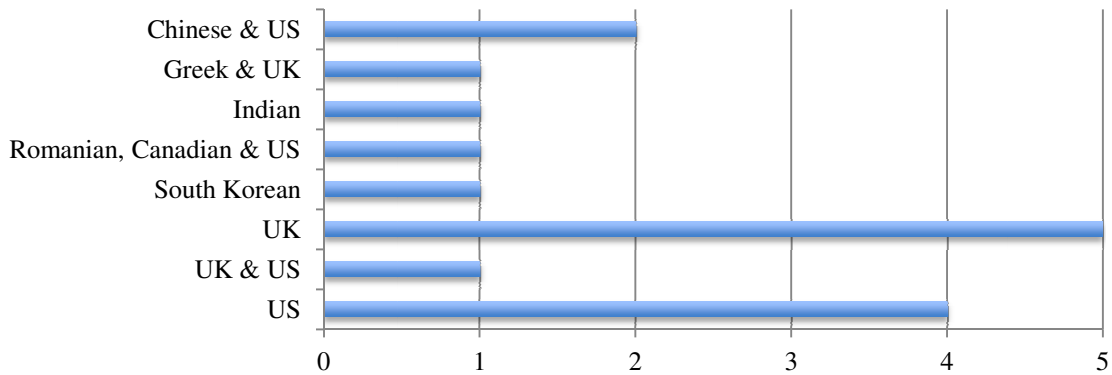
Chart to show the Age of the Respondents

### **Nationality**

Most respondents (25%) were born in the UK, 19% of the respondents were born in the US, and 13% were born in China. The remaining respondents were born in Bangladesh, Greece, India, Pakistan, Romania, South Korea, and Ukraine. Four respondents were still living in the country they were born in (three respondents in the US and one in the UK). Five respondents (from China, Greece, India and South Korea) had moved to the UK or US as young adults for education reasons or on student visas. Four respondents moved from the UK to the US due to job relocation via their employer.

Most respondents (31%) were of British nationality (UK), followed by 25% respondents who were of American nationality (US). Two respondents were of Chinese and American nationality; they were both born in China and had lived in the US for more than 20 years. One Greek born and one UK born respondent also had dual nationality, and one Romanian born respondent had triple nationality. One respondent who, was born in Ukraine (formerly USSR) and has lived in the US for 35 years, was stripped of Russian nationality. One British respondent was born in the UK but had immigrant parents from India.

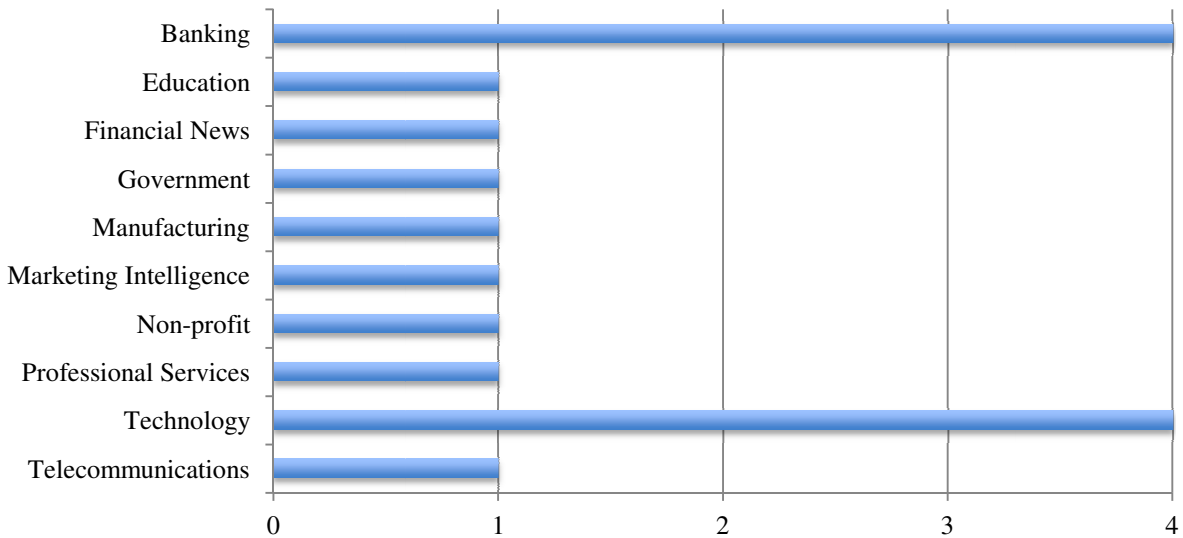
Chart to show the Respondents' Nationality



**Industry and Position**

Respondents worked in a broad range of industries; however, most respondents worked in either a Banking (25%) or Technology (25%) industry.

Chart to show the Respondents' Work Industry



The range of positions (or job titles) was also very broad; just two respondents held the same position as “Vice President”. Respondents’ positions are listed below:

*Application Specialist*

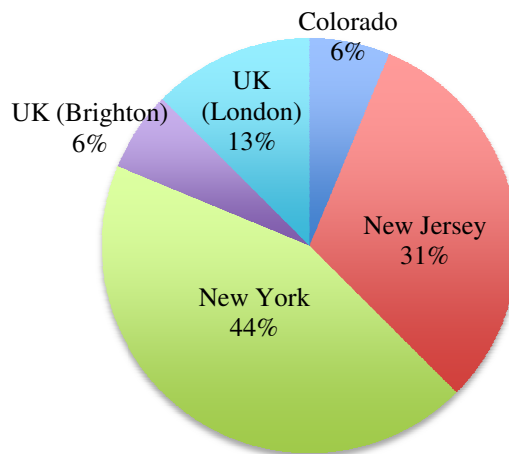
*Senior Database Administrator*

<i>Communications Manager</i>	<i>Senior Manager</i>
<i>Development Manager</i>	<i>Senior Systems Analyst</i>
<i>Engineer</i>	<i>Strategic Marketing Consultant</i>
<i>Head of Commissioning</i>	<i>System Engineer</i>
<i>Managing Director</i>	<i>University Director</i>
<i>Project Manager</i>	<i>Vice President (2)</i>
<i>Risk Manager</i>	

**Office Location**

Results from this question indicate the respondents’ country of residence. Most respondents (81%) were US based; 19% were UK based.

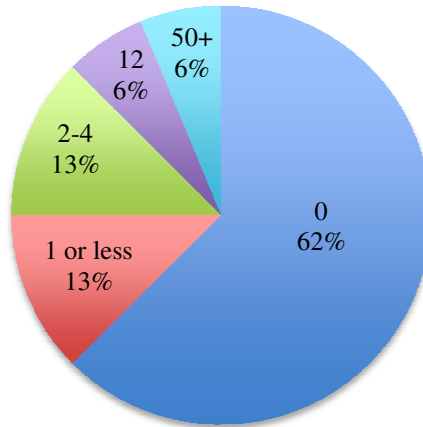
Chart to show the Location of the Respondents' Office



**Travel Abroad Frequency**

Responses vastly differed in the travel abroad frequency for work purposes: ten respondents do not travel abroad and four respondents travel a few times per year. One respondent travels abroad 12 times per year, and one respondent travels over 50 times per year (in most cases, to Canada).

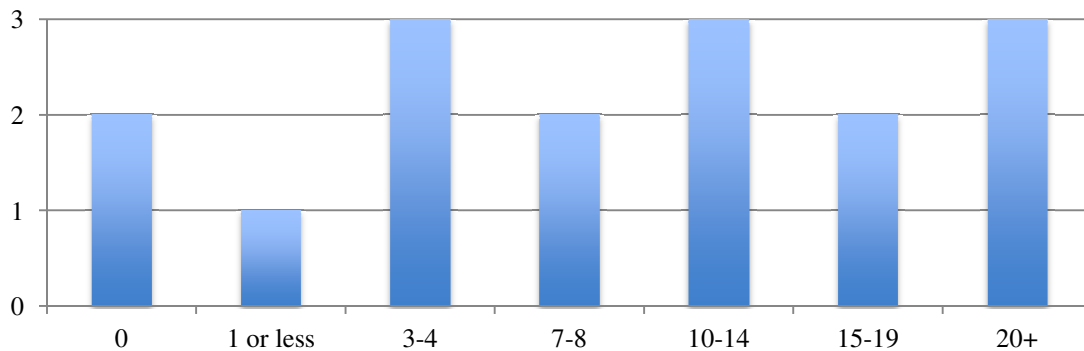
Chart to show Respondents' Travel Abroad Frequency (per year)



**Years in Leadership**

Respondents' experience of years in leadership varied from 0 years to 20+ years. Although the study aimed to interview only selected leaders, two respondents who had no previous experience of leadership were also included in the study. This was because one of these respondents worked for a global organization as a speechwriter and had written speeches for, and had worked very closely with, several leaders from different countries within this organization. The other respondent was included because of the vast amount of travelling abroad (more than 50 times per year) and the vast amount of cross-cultural communication his position involved.

Chart to show the Respondents' Years in Leadership



### **Details of the Analysis and Results**

The data collected from the interviews was categorized into four major thematic findings. The themes are listed below, followed by the interview questions that relate to each theme. Results from those particular questions were incorporated into each thematic finding.

#### *Theme 1: Leaders are Communicating Cross-Culturally and Virtually many times a day*

- 1) On average, how often do you communicate cross-culturally?
- 6) What is your understanding of Virtual Communication?
- 7) Excluding email, what tools do you use to communicate virtually?
- 8) On average, how often do you communicate virtually?

#### *Theme 2: Leaders are Resolving Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges with Accessible Language, Follow-up Communication and by being Accommodating*

- 2) What difficulties have you faced when communicating cross-culturally?
- 3) How are you resolving these difficulties or miscommunications?

#### *Theme 3: Factors most Critical to Leaders working in Diverse Teams are Personal/Cultural, Team Playing and Business Practices*

- 4) What training have you completed on diversity or cross-cultural communication?
- 5) What factors are critical to you when working in a diverse team?

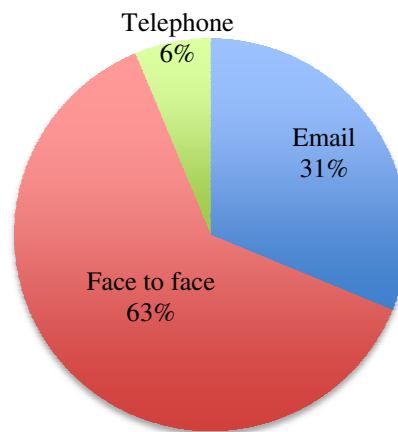
#### *Theme 4: As most Virtual Communication is recorded, or can be made public, Leaders adhere to Business Practices and Communicate in this Environment with Caution*

- 9) What difficulties have you faced when communicating virtually?
- 10) What steps have you taken to resolve virtual communication issues at work?

## Interview Method

Of the 16 interviews, 10 were conducted in a face-to-face setting at a mutually agreed convenient location and all 10 agreed for the interview to be audio recorded. One interview was conducted over the telephone and was also audio recorded. The remaining five interviews were conducted via email communication.

Chart to show the Interview Method



The interviews produced varying amounts of information and detail; the length of time of audio-recorded interviews ranged from 11 minutes to 41 minutes, the average interview lasted approximately 24 minutes. Of the interviews that were conducted via email, one respondent produced all answers (excluding demographic answers) in 237 words, whereas another respondent produced all answers in a total of 1,322 words.

### **Theme 1: Leaders are communicating Cross-Culturally and Virtually in their Workplaces many times a day**

Results from the interviews show that all respondents were communicating cross-culturally and/or virtually in their positions at work. Ninety-four per cent of respondents stated that they were communicating cross-culturally everyday and many times a day. Just one

respondent, due to the nature of her position, believed she communicated cross-culturally two to four times per month, as she owned her own business and often worked alone from home. This respondent communicated virtually more than any of the other respondents, at least 50 times per day. All respondents communicated virtually many times a day, including email and telephone communication.

Just one respondent defined his understanding of cross-cultural communication, as communication with people from a different geographical group and/or with people having a different religious background. One respondent, who is a member of several boards and senior groups, stated that much of her cross-cultural communication was with Caucasian-British male leaders from different organizations. She reasoned that this was probably a reflection of the area in which she lived as well as the fact that “there are very few non-white professionals working at senior levels across the city in different organizations”.

All respondents’ understanding of virtual communication was explained as either communication with no face-to-face contact or communication via electronic means. Most respondents had used video conferencing for work purposes, but just a few used it regularly. One respondent used virtual communication for work purposes 18 hours per day, usually using his blackberry outside of being in the office, Monday through Friday, with additional but fewer hours in the weekend. A few respondents communicated virtually “constantly” or “all the time”; however, one respondent rarely communicated virtually, other than via email or telephone.

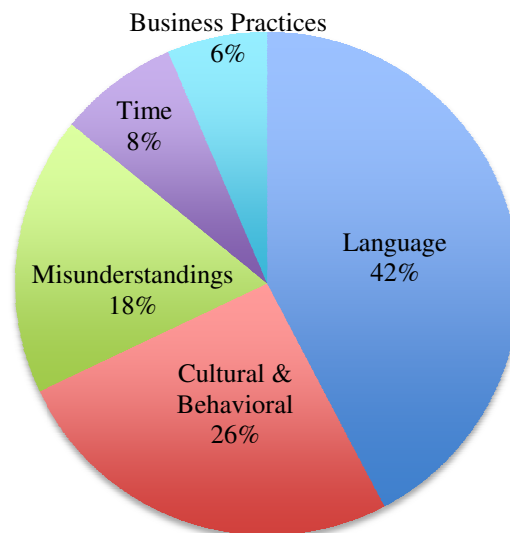
In order of popularity, tools used for communicating virtually (excluding email and telephone) were: telephone conference calls, instant messaging or online internal communicators, text messaging, and video conferencing. Other virtual communication included tweets, forums, bulletin boards, blogging, and other social media.

**Theme 2: Leaders are Resolving Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges with Accessible Language, Follow-up Communication and by being Accommodating**

Cross-cultural communication challenges from interview results were categorized into four main challenges: language, cultural & behavioral, misunderstandings & miscommunications, and time and business practices.

Thirteen of the 16 respondents (81%) mentioned language-related difficulties when communicating cross-culturally at work; these were mentioned a total of 33 times in interview results. ‘Cultural and Behavioral’ difficulties were mentioned 20 times and ‘Misunderstandings and Misinterpretations’ difficulties were mentioned 13 times. Difficulties concerned with time and business practices were mentioned 6 and 5 times respectively. These challenges are illustrated and further discussed below.

Chart to show Respondents' Cross-Cultural Communication Difficulties



**Language.** Accents, language skills and colloquialisms were found to be the most common language-related difficulties and were each mentioned by at least four respondents.



Three respondents felt that the use of sports terms were not understood or did not translate well cross-culturally. One respondent felt that sports metaphors are not used as regularly as they are in the US and should be limited in cross-cultural communication; "...you can't expect people to understand American football...". This respondent believed that, "in the US there is such a culture of winning – it's really important to win - I think a sports metaphor always comes to mind for people in the US" but feels that these are meaningless in many cultures outside of the US.

Conversely, one respondent always opens meetings abroad with a discussion on soccer; "outside of the US and Canada, is all soccer...and that's my language ...", and firmly believed "it works perfectly; that's the only common language that people know." This respondent obtains country-specific knowledge on, "the players and what's going on in their leagues, and if you know what the standings are and what some of the good players are doing then you *really* strike a *very* good conversation". This respondent uses this discussion on soccer as a relationship building exercise, prior to the commencement of business matters at meetings, but admitted that he excludes this discussion if there are females present in the meeting. This respondent went on to state, "Here [in the US] they have no clue [about soccer] because they live isolated...that's the problem with the Americans." This respondent believed that cross-cultural communication has never been a problem in his experience because "when you speak English, people understand that that's the common language and they adjust, so it's not a big deal...they make every effort to understand...they understand that there could be cultural differences and they realize that and it's never a problem". He also agreed that, when abroad, the people in those countries make a considerably greater effort to understand him.

One respondent who has subconsciously used acronyms and analogies that are widely used and understood in the US stated, “I often catch myself realizing what I am doing and I take a step back [as they] are assumed to be understood...when the communication process becomes so ingrained as a natural process that it’s often assumed that you’re dealing with one big cohesive team rather than these diverse teams across the globe.”

Respondents also felt that meanings or context, language translations and language differences causes difficulties when communicating cross-culturally. Other language-related difficulties included dialect, pronunciation, slang, and talking too fast.

***Cultural & Behavioral.*** Five respondents noted that general cultural differences caused cross-cultural communication difficulties. Four respondents believed that politeness caused difficulties; some found that certain cultures’ communication styles were overly polite or some were found abrupt or aggressive. For example, three respondents stated that some cultures may not want to offend, or may not want to upset management by asking for extensions to deadlines, and that some cultures “constantly agree without understanding or seeing through a task”. One respondent explained, “New York is forthright but it’s not the same for Indian cultures”; a total of three respondents had come to realize that team members in India were very reluctant to say ‘No’.

One respondent spoke of a particular experience with a Nigerian who communicated in ways that reflected status and level of authority, and “appeared to only give credence to staff on the basis of their position or authority”. This respondent believed that “some of these cultural differences may be based on historical practices in your country of origin, in terms of ‘elders’ in communities having leadership responsibility within their cultural groups”.

One American-born respondent believed that there is “this tendency to be like ‘I’m number 1’ but the rest of the world aren’t too keen on that understanding...so you have to be very careful not to be US centric...it’s repugnant to a lot of people and is not going to be received well”.

One respondent provided a detailed and lengthy answer stating that applying “...generalizations, norms, preconceived ideas and/or prejudices about people based on their cultural background, such as lifestyles, behaviors, aspirations, etc.” create further difficulties with cross-cultural communication. This respondent described an experience communicating with a Caucasian-British colleague as “abrupt, aggressive and therefore, unprofessional” that was “probably based on some cultural assumptions/prejudice from her perception about Indian women being submissive” and probably believed the respondent “would not be assertive enough to challenge this”.

One British Pakistani-born respondent described a time when he was interviewing a Muslim woman who was completely covered in religious dress and only her eyes were visible:

*“...I felt intimidated...the whole body is hidden, they’re hiding behind a blanket...a wall...all you can see is just their eyes...and that feels a bit difficult and you don’t know how to behave...you might say something that insults...on a telephone you know you’re not going to see the person but here, you had someone physically in front of you, but hidden... how do you get across to this person?...To be honest, I didn’t know how to resolve it...I wouldn’t say it was miscommunication but there were certain limitations...there was a barrier there, and couldn’t really get to the person. I just found it intimidating, limited. Even if that person were highly intelligent...there was something that was missing, an element of humanity that didn’t come*

*across as well as it would do. If she was just wearing a [headscarf], for example, it would have been more open. That was just very difficult”.*

The respondent was asked if virtual communication would have eased the discomfort and he agreed, and felt that it (not video conferencing) would have helped because “there was no misunderstanding on what was being said, I think it was just the fact that you couldn’t fully see the person.” There was one other person jointly interviewing with the respondent who, “felt very similar” to what the respondent felt.

Other difficulties in this section included the use of idiosyncrasies, conflicting personalities, laziness, and body language.

***Misunderstanding or Misinterpretation.*** Misunderstandings and misinterpretations, most likely caused by language differences, were mentioned six times by respondents as difficulties in cross-cultural communication. Three British respondents with immigrant parents noted that ‘assumptions’ and ‘lack of awareness’ could cause misunderstandings and misinterpretations in cross-cultural communication. Three respondents mentioned that not expressing or understanding exact requirements also caused these difficulties.

One South Korean respondent, who had been in a leadership role for less than one year, spoke of the misunderstandings his position had involved. Almost all Korean relationships are based on a superior/subordinate rank, where a Korean employee will execute his leader’s orders in an unquestioning manner, and the respondent was concerned that his team members may find him rude: “...my intention to communicate, my Korean way, but they cannot understand the Korean way – they misunderstood. Korean way means...it’s related to habit, Korean general thought...sometimes I’m afraid to speak in Korean way to them I’m just afraid it’s too rude...it’s not my intention...I’m just afraid they get misunderstood.”

***Time and Business Practices.*** Cross-cultural communication difficulties relating to time were brought up six times in interview results; the most common difficulty was with the different time zones. Three respondents had increased their working hours when communicating with people from abroad to accommodate the time difference. One respondent believed that the time taken to communicate is increased during cross-cultural communication.

One respondent had noticed in several communications (usually phone or video conferences) that team members in India are reluctant to speak up, and many “only let their seniors speak” in these situations.

Differences in work ethics or business practices were noted five times by respondents. Lack of response from colleagues, found to be rude by one respondent, also led to cross-cultural communication problems.

**Resolutions to Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges.** The interview results provided a broad range of resolutions that were used in an effort to resolve cross-cultural communication challenges in the workplace. These were categorized into three main resolutions: the use of accessible language, follow-up communication and being accommodating.

***Accessible Language.*** Four respondents use simple, direct language to avoid cross-cultural communication problems, and three respondents talked slowly and clearly. Three respondents felt that consistent “business” language was very important for everyone to become accustomed to. Three respondents eliminated metaphors and phrases, figurative speech and analogies when communication cross-culturally. Two respondents ensured the communication remained focused on specific goals. Other resolutions that promoted accessible language was avoiding or eliminating colloquialisms and slang, being more descriptive or explanatory, and using humor. One respondent, after realizing that Japanese colleagues felt it was impolite to say

“No” to leaders, now rephrases questions so that they can answer “yes”, for example “Was the work not done yet?”

***Follow-up Communication.*** Twelve respondents of the 16 (75%) request or confirm communication in writing, particularly with email and/or IM. Five respondents ask and encourage more questions and discussion to clarify the communication. One respondent described a “trust but verify” approach that involves listening or reading responses and then asking alternative questions to ensure consistency of responses. If inconsistencies are identified, the respondent then delves for deeper information; this approach has worked well especially with email and phone communication when there is lack of body language.

Five respondents repeat communication and/or clarify the communication in different ways. Three respondents, who all worked in technical positions, used more diagrams and visual aids to explain complicated systems or processes. And one respondent now records regular telephone conferences or videoconferences, to allow the communication to be replayed as necessary.

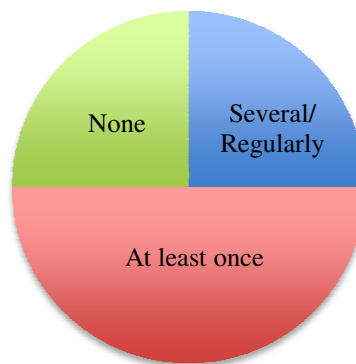
***Being Accommodating.*** Three respondents learned about the different cultures by asking for cultural assistance from those within the cultures, and one respondent had used a cultural coach. Two respondents accommodate and are flexible with time differences, and make themselves available outside of office hours. One of these respondents, who manages several teams in India, stated “there’s just one of me and 17 of them – it’s easier if I get up at 5am and get on to a conference call rather than all 17 of them work late hours.” Other steps to being accommodating during cross-cultural communication are: being open minded, having a willingness to reach a common ground or interest, reading body language, patience, keeping your

cool, and offering English lessons. One respondent now specifically recruits only good communicators in client-facing roles.

### **Theme 3: Factors most Critical to Leaders working in Diverse Teams are Personal/Cultural, Team Playing and Business Practices**

Three quarters of the respondents had undertaken cross-cultural or diversity training arranged by their employer. Half of the respondents had undertaken training at least once; and one quarter of the respondents regularly attend this type of training, and is monitored by their Human Resources department, or have attended several training sessions. One quarter, however, had not attended any such training for work purposes, and just one of these respondents attended a course at a local community center upon arriving to the US by choice.

Chart to show Respondents' Diversity or Cross-Cultural Communication Training



All 12 respondents who had completed cross-cultural or diversity training had undertaken the training because it was mandatory in their positions. There were considerably mixed feelings about the training that had been undertaken; one respondent felt that “it was useful in only one way – being out of the office”. Another respondent stated, “to be brutally honest, they are not effective. The way they do the training is too dry, too prescribed”. And another stated, “I have never found them as useful as actually talking to people from other cultures”. All three of these

respondents were British and had been exposed to different cultures (mostly in London) throughout their entire lives.

Most respondents found their training “helpful”, “useful” and “interesting”; one Chinese-born respondent found the training “very good” and “very useful”. One respondent, who had only attended one diversity training course over 25 years ago, explained “...back then, diversity really talked about women and men in the workplace...maybe some about African-Americans... diversity was trying to integrate women in to a trading room...not even integrate...just trying to make it possible...a non-hostile environment.”

Four respondents who had not completed any diversity training, and one respondent who had, felt that they had performed ‘on-the-job’ training and learning with their experiences at work. One respondent, who manages teams in India, first visited the teams 6 months after starting her position, and felt that this face-to-face contact had eased cross-cultural difficulties. One respondent, who had not completed any diversity training, and had “learned myself” and “travelled all around the world myself” felt very strongly about this type of training:

*“I don’t even want to listen to diversity training at work – that’s just a formal thing – a complete no-no. It has to come naturally; that’s for those that haven’t travelled or been exposed. But when you have 3 passports, you don’t need that training. I’ve lived in 3 continents, I speak 4 languages, what are they gonna tell ya? Why would you need more diversity training?”*

Many respondents had completed their diversity training as on-line seminars or compulsory reading or viewing of materials. Although the majority of the training was offered company-wide and mandatory for leaders and those they lead, it was found that the more senior leaders undertook mandatory training of this type more regularly and was more closely

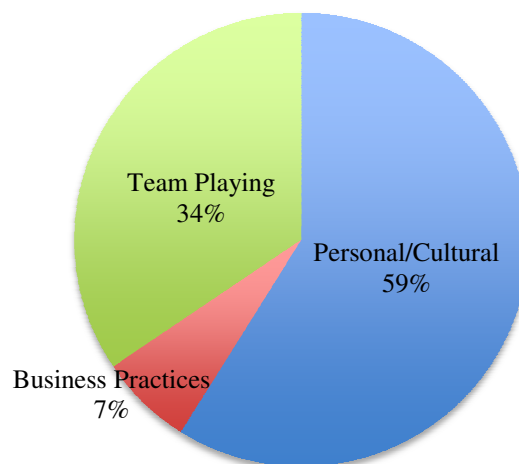


monitored. One respondent stated, “Ten years ago, you didn’t even hear of it. Now, pretty much every month there’s some course I have to go to...’sign up for this’...’watch this video, it’s mandatory’...’do this compliance training’...I have my own training portal”. Three respondents found this type of training a regular requirement in their senior leadership positions.

One respondent positively discussed the most recent mandatory training undertaken called “unconscious bias”, and stated that this training is useful for “bringing out unconscious biases that people may hold, even if they think they do not hold any.”

**Critical Factors when working in Diverse Teams.** The complete count of factors that leaders believed are critical when working in a diverse team amounted to 90. These factors were categorized into three broad areas: personal/cultural, team playing and business procedures. The most popular category, personal/cultural, included 53 counts; team playing included 31 counts and business practices included 6 counts.

Chart to show Respondents' Critical Factors in Diverse Teams



***Personal/Cultural.*** Respondents felt that being able to communicate safely and comfortably, with clear and concise communication, was by far the most critical factor when

communicating within a diverse team. This factor was mentioned 11 times in the interview results. Being respectful towards one another was mentioned 5 times. Four respondents felt that being open-minded or open to suggestions was a critical factor. The factors, 'being aware of unconscious behavior', 'understanding each other' and 'learning and accommodating cultures', were each mentioned by three respondents.

One Chinese-born respondent stated of her upbringing and education in China, "...we were not encouraged to talk too much or to ask too many questions...not to make myself look so stupid..." and this had affected her communication with an American mentor and British co-worker in her first employment in the US. Although she found her American mentor to be "extremely helpful and thorough" when she approached him, she was reluctant to do this. Her British co-worker, however, "seemed to understand what I was thinking about...he actually initiated a lot of help from his side. He came to me, without I have to go to him to ask for help, almost on a daily basis...make sure I understand all my assignments and make sure I have a way to move on. So I got a lot of help from this co-worker."

The following factors were each mentioned twice in interview results: avoid making assumptions, honesty, and patience.

The following factors were mentioned once in interview results: building up the confidence of team members, not disadvantaging anyone (if English is their second language), seeing everyone as individuals, using humor, learn what motivates, sensitivity, thinking carefully, slowing down, observing group dynamics, willingness to integrate, build on relationships outside of work, not being ashamed of failure, personal hygiene, exposure to the variety of perspectives, asking or encouraging more questions, and being realistic and tolerant.

***Team Playing.*** ‘Being flexible’ and ‘updating, sharing information or providing feedback’ were the most popular critical factors in team playing, and were each mentioned by five respondents. Three respondents mentioned having ‘clear roles and responsibilities’, and ‘listening’ as critical factors.

The following factors were mentioned twice in interview results: Operate as a solid team, participating and helping, taking ownership of tasks, meeting or having shared expectations, and being equal, fair, and inclusive.

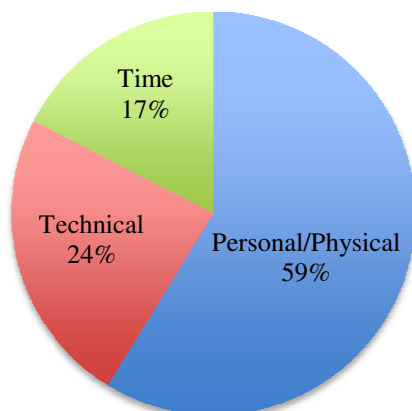
The following factors were mentioned once in interview results: availability, utilize strengths, collaborative, seeing tasks through, regular ‘touch-point’ meetings, and understanding factors outside of the team’s control.

***Business Practices.*** The importance of following business procedures, were each mentioned once: punctuality, accuracy, not wasting time, being focused on goals, logging or recording information, having a tight agenda, and having a detailed plan.

#### **Theme 4: As most Virtual Communication is recorded, or can be made public, Leaders adhere to Business Practices and Communicate in this Environment with Caution**

The difficulties leaders had experienced when communicating virtually were categorized into three broad areas: those relating to personal or physical issues, those relating to technical difficulties, and those that relate to concerns with Time. Personal/physical issues were mentioned a total of 37 times in interview results; at least nine respondents felt that this created difficulties when communicating virtually. Technical difficulties were mentioned 15 times and issues that relate to concerns with time were mentioned 11 times.

Chart to show Respondents' Difficulties with Virtual Communication



***Personal/Physical:*** The majority of the respondents found that the lack of body language made communicating virtually difficult; nine respondents mentioned this as a difficulty. One respondent detailed, “80% of communication is non-verbal” and several respondents mentioned, “having a face-to-face conversation is much easier”, and that the lack of physical cues or eye contact made the communication more difficult. Lack of emotion, lack of feelings, and lack of rapport were also each mentioned once. One South-Korean born respondent felt uncomfortable when he needed to log in to his team members’ systems remotely; he felt they may feel an invasion of privacy when he does this, and stressed the importance of obtaining their agreement first. One American born respondent stated that he has not experienced any issues when communicating with video conferencing as he had with teleconferencing.

Four respondents believed that virtual communication was more susceptible to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. One respondent found that communication “especially in vehicles that require limited text, e.g. twitter” are more easily misunderstood. One respondent explained, “you can talk to someone on the phone, who then emails the complete reverse of what you just agreed”. And another responded quoted “it’s just easier to pick up the phone”. Being

unclear, lacking detail and not being able to “get everything across” were mentioned a total of six times in interview results.

Language, accent, dialect, and lack of tone were each mentioned once in interview results. Engagement, discipline and participation were mentioned four times by respondents; one respondent described a meeting she had attended, with several team members physically attending, but just one person participated in this meeting by video conference: “...the person was not able to engage in the discussion in the same way due to non-verbal communication... which helps in having more direct/immediate communication or responses”. One respondent had experienced a lack of participation from team members which he believed were cultural; “for some, it’s OK to be listeners...there’s a different model here...everybody participates... everybody can verify”. One respondent asked, “...how do I know if this person is doing enough work? I have no idea of keeping an eye on them”.

**Technical.** Five respondents felt that problems with technical connections or, specifically, ‘network latency’, made virtual communication difficult. Three respondents discussed the problem of “talking over each other” or not knowing when somebody wants to speak, and two respondents felt that this can come across as impolite. One respondent spoke of the “dead air” when communicating virtually.

Other technical virtual communication concerns that were mentioned in interview results were: the permanence of the communication and the inability to retract the information once it had been sent (specifically with emails). Two respondents discussed the escalation of emails; one felt that “the chain of emails can get ridiculous”, and that emails initially sent for one person could result in getting forwarded to several people. Another respondent felt that ‘typos’ are magnified in virtual communication; for example, “if you miss a zero in a statistic” in an email.

**Time.** Four respondents felt that the delayed response time experienced in virtual communication added difficulties when communicating in this environment. Three respondents felt that the difference in time zones added to the problem, and two respondents mentioned the time it takes to set up the virtual communication. Due to technological advancements, however, two respondents had experienced great improvements when communicating virtually. One respondent, who always attends virtual meetings with a technician present, felt that technological issues have recently decreased to a bare minimum. Other time-related issues included: being obligated to adjust to differing time zones, having to be available during unsociable hours and more hours of the day, and being expected to be on the phone all the time. One respondent also mentioned that virtual communication increases the time taken to communicate in comparison to face-to-face communication.

One British respondent residing in the US, however, refused to increase his working hours to accommodate differing time zones: “A big issue is getting hold of people [but] I am not available outside of office hours – I’m not an American who dies for his company; if I’m not at work, I’m not working. I never take my laptop home with me – I might be causing a problem for other people, but I don’t care ‘cos I don’t get paid extra if I work from home!”

**Resolutions to Virtual Communication Challenges.** The interview results provided a broad range of resolutions that are used by respondents in an effort to resolve virtual communication challenges in the workplace. These were categorized into two very broad areas and showed an almost even balance: 34 answers fell into the Business Practices category and 32 answers fell into the ‘Communicating with Caution’ category.

**Business Practices.** The most popular answer in this section related to follow-up communication; seven respondents stated that they follow up videoconferences or telephone

conferences with emails, minutes, or actions. One respondent requests information by email first, so that the recipient has time to prepare, and then follows through with a telephone call.

Keeping order, adhering to a tight agenda, and having actionable items were mentioned five times in interview results, and one respondent felt that organizational priorities should be made more aware of.

Four respondents said that they utilize the better communicators when communicating virtually; one respondent uses a proficient bilingual communicator at meetings and one respondent stated that when recruiting, good communication skills are now a necessary job requirement. This respondent stated that she also pairs up good communicators with poor communicators to better utilize the skills of the poor communicators.

Three respondents request or use more video conferencing, for additional visuals, and/or use more cameras when communicating virtually. The following resolutions were mentioned twice: recording meetings (so those involved can rewind and replay the meeting), having a written record of the virtual communication, and using better technologies. One respondent used instant messaging while having a video or telephone conference and, for example, confirmed names or dates in writing. Other resolutions mentioned once were: ensuring a response, being flexible with time, acting as a 'gamekeeper' or 'mediator' role and being copied into emails, setting time limits to virtual meetings (e.g. everyone take a break after 2 hours on a telephone conference call), having regular one-to-ones, everyone physically meeting each other once a year, not copying people into emails too much, and everyone being courteous.

***Communicating with Caution.*** Several respondents expressed the need to communicate with more caution: the following resolutions were mentioned once: be more accurate, be more aware of violations, be more careful, use message filtering, read messages carefully, re-read what

you have just written, be careful with tone, think about your audience, spend more time preparing your communication, repeat yourself, talk slowly, talk clearly, remove emotion, ask more questions before communicating, use more official or business language, be more empathetic, be more sympathetic, be more engaged, be more personal, ensure mutual understanding, and do not use jokes. Conversely, the following resolutions were also mentioned: use casual tones, use humor, use emoticons or differing text formats (e.g. bold, color, italics) in emails to express more feeling (or lack of anger) in them.

Six respondents felt that if virtual communication is being miscommunicated, they resorted to (or used more) face-to-face communication. Two respondents felt that building trust was an important factor in resolving virtual communication, one described her relationship with another colleague who she had not yet met face-to-face: “you can build up a personality and a rapport in email even though it’s so impersonal...it’s something about the way he communicated, made me feel at ease...he trusts me, trusts me to get the job done...trusts my recommendations”.

### **Summary**

It was found in interview results that all respondents were heavily communicating cross-culturally and/or virtually in their workplaces, and most had experienced challenges when communicating in these environments. Three quarters of the respondents interviewed had undertaken at least one diversity or cross-cultural training session, and there were mixed experiences of the training. Senior, or more experienced leaders, had undertaken this type of training more regularly, which was monitored by their employers.

The difficulties respondents had with cross-cultural communication were categorized as language, cultural and behavioral, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, time, and business



practices. Respondents had resolved these cross-cultural communication issues with the use of accessible language, follow-up communication and by being accommodating.

The difficulties respondents had with virtual communication in their workplaces were categorized as personal/physical, technical, and with time. Respondents had resolved these difficulties by adhering to business practices and communicating in these environments with caution.

The thematic findings discussed in this chapter have identified common and specific challenges experienced by selected leaders when communicating cross-culturally and virtually, and have identified resolutions or strategies that these leaders have used to address these challenges. The final chapter will present a brief overview of this study and the major findings; the results from this chapter will also be further analyzed, and include the author's thoughts and discussion about the implications of these findings.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Overview and Significance of the Study**

Within the last few decades, the workplace has experienced tremendous changes in cultural diversity and technology usage. Today's global or geographically dispersed organization is prompting leaders to communicate with teams consisting of vastly different backgrounds, languages and styles, using advanced technologies. Leaders of such teams are challenged to communicate effectively despite the many differences, and would benefit from learning new skills and techniques when communicating in these cross-cultural and virtual environments.

This study has highlighted the changes that have occurred within the workplace during the last few decades, the reasons for them, and the challenges that they have implied. Chapter 2 provided a review of the material that has been written on understanding cross-cultural and virtual communication. A total of ten questions were designed for this qualitative research study, as described in the third chapter, and 16 selected leaders were interviewed on their experiences of cross-cultural and virtual communication in their positions or workplaces. The previous chapter of this study presented the major findings from the interview results, and identified strategies that these selected leaders have used to address the challenges. This final chapter further analyzes the major findings of this study and includes the author's thoughts and personal experiences that relate to this study.

### **A Personal Experience**

In 1998, the author of this paper worked for an Information Technology (IT) recruitment agency in the UK that connected their clients with candidates having specific IT experience or skills. The author is British, has a traditional Indian name, and was born in the UK to immigrant parents from India. All members of staff in the agency, except the author, were Caucasian-

British. To the author's dismay, the director of the agency asked the author to use an English pseudonym for work purposes to "make it easier" for the clients, the candidates and the other recruitment consultants to communicate with her. Candidates who were seeking new positions submitted their resumes to the agency, and many were from China and India speaking English as a second language. The recruitment consultants rarely met these candidates; most communicated via telephone or occasional emails. If candidates had the required or relevant skills for a job opening the consultants would contact the candidate, and would at times handwrite messages on candidates' resume, for their personal records, following the communication. The author found one handwritten message on an Indian candidate's resume: "*Heavy paki accent but better than a chinky*". Again, to the author's dismay, the director of the agency advised the author not to take anything written on their files "seriously".

Aside from the author recalling this experience as discriminatory and offensive, the author realized that the recruitment consultants had experienced problematic communication with candidates, and many were reluctant to put forward candidates with thick accents to clients due to this. As a result of this problematic communication, the author believes that all those involved were missing out on some vital processes that would enhance the organization; e.g. the agency could potentially miss out on commissions, the clients were not always presented with the best candidates for the job, and the candidates were not being put forward for positions even though they may have had the relevant skills.

In 1998, there was a high demand for IT skills, as the background information in this research explains, but there was not enough of a supply of candidates possessing those skills in the US or UK; there was more of a supply from India and China. The recruitment consultants struggled to effectively communicate with this supply. Fifteen years following this experience,

the organizational landscape has continued to change at what seems to be at an accelerated rate in the same direction; most organizations now consist of increasingly diverse teams who must communicate face-to-face or virtually. This motivated the author to investigate these changes and challenges, and how leaders of today are addressing them.

### **Addressing the Challenges of Cross-Cultural Communication**

Most leaders in this study had undertaken diversity training, but this was found to be both useful and a complete waste of time. The author believes that the usefulness of this type of training depends on the attendees' exposure to and experiences with different cultures. For example, the Chinese-born respondent who found her training very useful was brought up in a relatively homogeneous city in China and moved to the US in her late 20s; those respondents who spoke about the uselessness of their diversity training had been brought up and were living in very diverse parts of London.

Yet, the author believes that diversity training is necessary for all leaders in today's workplace. It must provide a starting point for leaders and offer baselines or guidelines, regardless of what experiences or exposure they have or have not had. If this is not undertaken, there is a risk that leaders may self-teach themselves incorrectly, allowing leaders to subconsciously reinforce bad cross-cultural communication habits, actions and behaviors that could be found derogatory or threatening (Widman, 2013).

It is important for all leaders to understand, though, that no diversity training can ever cover or prepare leaders for each and every scenario. And it had become apparent during this research that a 'laundry list' approach to communicating with someone from another country alone is not enough. For example, at first hearing of one respondent's answers, the author found them to be exclusive, ignorant and inappropriate; nevertheless, the author later realized that the

respondent had one aim in mind: to reach a common ground or interest, while building rapport with the person(s) he was communicating with, and at this aim he had made considerable effort and success in doing this.

The vast majority of the leaders in this study were communicating cross-culturally many times a day and, as in the literature review, the results from this study found that language was the biggest challenge. But when language is used simply or accessibly, together with follow-up written communication, cross-cultural communication challenges are minimized, as identified in the second thematic finding. As the president of an association, the author leads a team that consists of 75% of people who were not born in the US and most of these people have strong accents from all over the world. Initially, the author found the verbal communication of some of these people to be abrupt or loud and some to be timid or indirect; however, the author soon realized that their written communication was exceptional, polite and clear, and accent was easily forgotten when the author put in the effort to understand them.

Members of this association clearly have different communication styles, which are described in the second chapter, but two Caucasian-American females in this association also have staggeringly different communication styles. Falcoa (2008), a middle-aged male originally from Rio de Janeiro, would much rather communicate with, for example, an older Muslim woman who lives in the countryside of Mongolia instead of someone with a similar background to him, because he may risk making more assumptions with what he *should* know and understand about the latter. In this respect, cross-cultural communication could prove an easier task if both parties 'start at zero' and make no assumptions or use stereotypes. One respondent in this study believed that stereotypes are a "self-fulfilling prophecy people play up, which is as much as a problem as casting someone in a stereotype". He firmly believed that accepting and

treating every team member as an *individual*, no matter where they are from or what background they have, resolves and simplifies cross-cultural communication. Interestingly, the author believed that her interview with this Caucasian-British male *was* cross-cultural due to her Indian ethnic origin; however, this respondent felt that the communication *was not* cross-cultural as the two were both British, had been brought up in England, and had British accents. Falcoa (2008) would argue that *every* communication is cross-cultural because of age, gender, religion, education, etc., and added, "...even if we have 99.9% of the strategies correct when dealing with one particular country but we have not understood the person in front of you, we have failed". The aim, then, is to seek first to understand, Covey's (2004) fifth habit of highly effective people, and the author believes that all seven habits (such as 'being proactive' and 'beginning with the end in mind') would promote highly effective cross-cultural communication. See Appendix B for Covey's list of habits.

### **Addressing the Challenges of Virtual Communication**

All respondents were communicating virtually many times a day, and some were communicating more virtually than face-to-face. The personal or physical difference when communicating in a virtual environment in comparison to a face-to-face setting was respondents' biggest challenge; the lack of body language or physical cues. Broadly, leaders are addressing the challenges of virtual communication by adhering to business practices and communicating with caution.

Arguably, there will be times when face-to-face communication is necessary. Eight months after Yahoo had announced their ban on employees working from home, they insist that it was the right decision: "People are more productive when they're alone, but they're more collaborative and innovative when they're together", and Yahoo's director claims that their

workplace “has become a catalyst for energy and buzz...Employee engagement is up...and agile teams are thriving” (Lindsay, 2013). It would be interesting to understand how Yahoo is managing its global offices outside of the US, and how they are evaluating the collaboration and innovation in those virtual environments. However, there may be times when virtual communication is more desirable than face-to-face communication. One respondent felt extremely uncomfortable interviewing a woman in religious dress, with only her eyes visible. Conducting initial interviews virtually could prove more effective when assessing basic skills, and, in this particular case, would have avoided a face-to-face communication challenge.

One respondent, who first met the teams she was managing in India six months after being in that position, believed that the virtual communication with her team was “very tough” for the first six months but found that many challenges had eased after meeting the team in person. Lojeski & Reilly (2007) believe that these initial meetings build relationships, create trust within the team, and help to better manage virtual relationships across cultural diversity. This respondent realized that because many team members were overly polite and “would go out of their way not to offend”, messages were not communicated easily through the tone of their voices on telephone calls, and she needed to repeatedly “dig deeper for more information”. Video-conferences had recently helped by adding visual cues but after meeting the team, conducting one-on-one’s and learning more about each team members’ career aspirations, she had better understood team members and had built a better relationship with them.

Other respondents had found, too, that Japanese or Indian team members were reluctant to say “No” or would only speak up if their senior had allowed them or given permission for them to speak in telephone or video conferences. Personally, the author has found that many Indians believe that working with or for a prestigious American company is the highest or most

desirable position at work, and team members would do whatever it takes to please their American leaders or co-workers. Some team members, for fear of being scolded or losing their jobs, are unable to speak openly with their leaders, and leaders must be aware of these differences and adapt their communication accordingly. For example, one respondent now purposely rephrases her questions to team members so that they are able to answer “yes”.

In virtual communication, leaders must evaluate and select the right tools so that their inherent leadership skills can be communicated to their team members. But despite the virtual communication tool selected, Zofi (2012) believes that a virtual team’s essence remains to focus on people, built on a foundation of open and effective communication. It is therefore crucial then that leaders build trust and foster a culture of engagement with team members when communicating virtually (Sheridan, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

In 2013, Chinese tourism officials issued a “Guidebook for Civilized Travel Abroad”, which listed the do’s and don’ts of international travel; general tips included not picking your nose in public or not slurping soup from a bowl (Johanson, 2013). Officials believed that this “uncivilized behavior” was damaging the country’s reputation. This guidebook demonstrates that China is making an effort to guide tourists to behave respectfully, without offending the global community.

In this research, the most common or effective strategy that leaders in the US or UK have used to address the challenges of cross-cultural or virtual communication is to apply the correct business etiquette or business practices at work. The major thematic findings in the previous chapter had reference to, or were related to, business etiquette: use of accessible language, follow-up communication, team playing, adhering to business practices, and communicating



with caution all fall into this category. Fortunately, there are several guidebooks and mass amounts of information on international business etiquette, much of which provides invaluable guidance on cross-cultural and virtual communication in the workplace. Pachter (2013) has written several books in this field and her latest book, “The Essentials of Business Etiquette: How to Greet, Eat and Tweet your way to Success”, offers practical advice on establishing rapport, maintaining a professional image when communicating or dining for business reasons, and when communicating virtually.

Pachter (2013) concludes, however, that she has “given the skills, tools and resources to make some changes” in how leaders should present themselves in the workplace, but only if “they *choose* to do so”. The author agrees, and adds that the success of resolving such challenges depends on the individual leader’s will and drive to effectively communicate cross-culturally or virtually. Obtaining cultural intelligence, or indeed virtual intelligence, involves three further components: knowledge, strategy and action, as explained in the literature review. Knowledge and strategy could be learned in diversity training and strategic planning; leaders can put this in to action through exposure and experience, which could be measured with continual follow-up communication. As cultures continue to change, and as technology continues to improve, addressing the challenges of cross-cultural or virtual communication will inevitably continue to remain ‘work in progress’. But as leaders become more aware of the cultural differences that exist, they can work towards finding the right balance of convergence and divergence to global work practices.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research was limited to 16 leaders based in the UK or US, previously known to the author. If more time and resources were available, the study could be improved by conducting

more interviews, with the possibility of travelling to other countries and interviewing selected leaders on a global scale. It would be interesting to observe the leaders in action in their workplaces; for example, more information could be derived from observing their cross-cultural and virtual communication at some of their work meetings or situations, and further discussing these scenarios with the leaders.

It had been planned to conduct more interviews virtually, by videoconference, but as the author did not have access to the technology that enabled recording this communication and most interviewees were available to meet in person, most interviews in this research were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded. The research could be improved by conducting more of the interviews virtually, ideally 50%, so that the researcher could evaluate the difference between face-to-face versus virtual communication while interviewing.

The majority of the selected leaders in this research worked for large technology or financial organizations. Interviewing leaders from smaller organizations, where human, financial and technological resources may be limited, could represent different types or different levels of challenges that would require further study and analysis.

## References

- Ang, S., Earley, P. C. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press
- Barnato, K. (2013). *London wins! It has the most expensive office space*. Retrieved January 26 2013 from [http://www.cnbc.com/id/100404237/London\\_Wins\\_It\\_Has\\_the\\_Most\\_Expensive\\_Office\\_Space](http://www.cnbc.com/id/100404237/London_Wins_It_Has_the_Most_Expensive_Office_Space)
- Bloch, S., Whiteley, P. (2009). *How to manage in a flat world: Ten strategies to get connected to your team wherever they are*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press
- Bowers, C., Jentsch, F., Salas, E. (2006). *Creating high tech teams: Practical guidance on work performance and technology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Branigan, T. (2013). *China's advice on travel: Do queue, don't litter – and don't steal lifejackets*. Retrieved November 22, 2013 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/03/china-advice-travel-tourism-guide>
- Busch, E., Nash, J., Bell, B.S. (2011). *Remote work: An examination of current trends and emerging issues*. Retrieved February 3, 2013 from [http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs/research/upload/Spring2011\\_CAHRSSRemoteWorkReport.pdf](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs/research/upload/Spring2011_CAHRSSRemoteWorkReport.pdf)
- Chaney, L. H., Martin, J. S. (2012). *Global business etiquette: A guide to international communication and customs*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger
- Covey, S. R. (2004). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. Retrieved November 23 2013 from <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits-habit5.php>

- Covey, S. R. (2008). *Questions for Covey: Communicating potential*. Retrieved February 4 2013 from <http://www.trainingmag.com/article/questions-covey-communicating-potential>
- Dool, R. (2012). *Cross-cultural communication*. Retrieved July 11 2012 from [http://myweb.shu.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab\\_tab\\_group\\_id=\\_2\\_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D\\_323752\\_1%26url%3D](http://myweb.shu.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id=_2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D_323752_1%26url%3D)
- Falcao, H. (2008). *Cross-cultural negotiations: Avoiding the pitfalls*. Retrieved July 8 2013 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4GjC0ipJIA>
- Fisher, K., Fisher, M. (2001). *The distance manager: A hands-on guide to managing off-site employees and virtual teams*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill
- Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Harris, P. R., Moran, R. T., Moran, S. V. (2004). *Managing cultural differences (Sixth Edition)*. Oxford, UK: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Hu, Z., Khan, M. (1997). *Why is China growing so fast?* Retrieved May 8 2013 from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/issues8/>
- Johanson, M. (2013). *China's 'guidelines on civilized travel abroad' offers these 25 pearls of wisdom*. Retrieved November 22, 2013 from <http://www.ibtimes.com/chinas-guidelines-civilized-travel-abroad-offers-these-25-pearls-wisdom-1414236>
- Lindsell-Roberts (2011). *New rules for today's workplace*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- Liswood, L. A. (2010). *The loudest duck: Moving beyond diversity while embracing differences to achieve success at work*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- Kimball, L. (1997). *Managing virtual teams*. Retrieved February 4 2013 from <http://www.groupjazz.com/pdf/vteams-toronto.pdf>
- Klobucher, T. (2011). *Characteristics of generation 2020: Generations at work*. Retrieved February 23 2013 from <http://www.thegreatworkplacerevolution.com/characteristics-of-generation-2020-generations-at-work/>
- Lojeski, K. S., Reilly, R. R. (2007). *The virtual workforce: A shifting paradigm*. Retrieved February 4 2013 from <http://virtualdistance.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/The-Virtual-Workforce-A-Shifting-Paradigm.pdf>
- Mayer-Guell, A. M., Kandath, K. P., Oetzel, J., Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Communication behavior of virtual workforces*. IABC Research Foundation. Retrieved March 23 2013 from <http://www.wprf2010.se/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/VirtualWorkforce.pdf>
- McCrum, R. (2010). *Globish: How the English language became the world's language*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd.
- Miller, K. (2012). *Organizational communication: Approaches and processes*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning
- Mindtools (n.d.). *Cultural intelligence: Working successfully with diverse groups*. Retrieved April 14 2013 from <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/cultural-intelligence.htm>
- Morrison, T., Conaway, W. (2012). *Kiss, bow, or shake hands: sales and marketing*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies
- Murthy, N. R. N. (2009) *An interview with N. R. Narayana Murthy*. Retrieved January 24 2013 from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DckMKo\\_9ECI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DckMKo_9ECI)
- Nusca, A. (2013). *Marissa Mayer, I hear you*. Retrieved March 23 2013 from <http://www.zdnet.com/marissa-mayer-i-hear-you-7000011785/>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2007). *Offshoring and employment: Trends and impacts*. Danvers, MA: OECD Publishing

Ouye, J. A. (2011). *Five trends that are dramatically changing work and the workplace*.

Retrieved February 22 2013 from

[http://www.knoll.com/research/downloads/WP\\_FiveTrends.pdf](http://www.knoll.com/research/downloads/WP_FiveTrends.pdf)

Papa, N. (n.d.). *Effective virtual communication*. Retrieved September 14 2013 from

[http://www.ehow.com/about\\_6756180\\_effective-virtual-communication.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_6756180_effective-virtual-communication.html)

Pachter, B. (2013). *The essentials of business etiquette: How to greet, eat and tweet your way to success*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Education

Sachs, J.D. (2011). *The price of civilization: Reawakening American virtue and prosperity*. New York, NY: Random House Inc.

Samovar, L. A. (2000). *Oral communication: Speaking across cultures*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Company

Sheridan, K. (2012). *The virtual manager: Cutting edge solutions for hiring, managing, motivating, and engaging mobile employees*. Pompton Plains, NJ: The Career Press, Inc.

Sundar, N. (2013). Interview by telephone conversation on January 29 2013.

Swisher, K. (2013). "*Physically together*": *Here's the internal Yahoo no-work-from-home memo for remote workers and maybe more*. Retrieved March 24 2013 from

<http://allthingsd.com/20130222/physically-together-heres-the-internal-yahoo-no-work-from-home-memo-which-extends-beyond-remote-workers/>

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Co. Inc.

Tannen, D (1994). *Talking from 9 to 5*. New York, NY: William Morrow & Company Inc.

Thomas, D., Inkson, K. (2004). *Cultural intelligence*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Thomas, K. (2000). *Psychological readiness for multicultural leadership*. Retrieved on March 25 2013 from [http://www8.esc.edu/esonline/across\\_esc/forumjournal.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/6726b40cc093dda9852567ca0066fa51?OpenDocument](http://www8.esc.edu/esonline/across_esc/forumjournal.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/6726b40cc093dda9852567ca0066fa51?OpenDocument)

Ubell, R. (2010). *Virtual team learning*. Retrieved April 16, 2013 from [http://myweb.shu.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-2484414-dt-content-rid-4473789\\_2/courses/2012\\_SPRING\\_COMM7002WB/Virtual%20Team%20Learning.pdf](http://myweb.shu.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-2484414-dt-content-rid-4473789_2/courses/2012_SPRING_COMM7002WB/Virtual%20Team%20Learning.pdf)

Vedantam, S. (2009). *Most diversity training ineffective, study finds*. Retrieved April 12 2013 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/19/AR2008011901899.html>

Verizon. (2010). *There's more to video than meets the eye: making the cultural shift to visual collaboration*. Retrieved January 31 2013 from [http://www.mclellancreative.com/files/verizon\\_business\\_white\\_paper\\_videoconferencing.pdf](http://www.mclellancreative.com/files/verizon_business_white_paper_videoconferencing.pdf)

Widman, A. (2013). Personal communication on October 31 2013.

Wolcott, M. (2007). *What is web 2.0?* Retrieved May 9 2013 from [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125\\_162-51066094/what-is-web-20/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125_162-51066094/what-is-web-20/)

Zarndt, F. (2010). *What did you say? A tutorial on intercultural communication*. Retrieved March 20, 2013 from <http://www.slideshare.net/cowboyMontana/what-did-you-say-a-tutorial-on-intercultural-communication>

Zofi, Y. (2012). *A manager's guide to virtual teams*. New York, NY: American Management Association

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. On average, how often do you communicate with people from different cultures?
2. What difficulties have you faced when communicating cross-culturally?
3. How are you resolving these difficulties or miscommunications?
4. What training have you completed on diversity or cross-cultural communication?
5. What factors are critical to you when working in a diverse team?
6. What is your understanding of virtual communication?
7. Excluding email, what tools do you use to communicate virtually?
8. On average, how often do you communicate virtually?
9. What difficulties have you faced when communicating virtually?
10. What steps have you taken to resolve virtual communication issues at work?



### **Appendix B: Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**

1. Be Proactive. Proactive people choose their behavior and do not blame external sources to blame their behavior, and use proactive language.
2. Begin with the end in mind. To begin each day, task or project with a clear vision of your desired direction and destination.
3. Put things first. This habit combines the first two habits and prioritizes tasks or events.
4. Think win-win. Achieving a balance with integrity, maturity with an abundance mentality
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Listening with the intent to understand, and not to reply or prematurely deciding what the other person means before he/she finishes communicating.
6. Synergize. Two heads are better than one.
7. Sharpen the saw. Having a balanced program for self-renewal physically, socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.