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Transcending national culture to implement diverse international projects: the supremacy of individuals and influence of organisations

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Abstract

Globalisation of the world economy and trade, internationalisation of industries and organisations, born-global firms: these have all resulted in international working becoming the norm for ordinary people. Working internationally presents particular challenges over and above simply living in multicultural societies. International project work involves a further set of challenges, skills and keys to success due to constraints on resource, temporary teams, demands of delivery and time/scope limits.

Based on an extensive series of in-depth interviews with participants and leaders in a 11-year series of different, but connected, international projects, this article explores the keys to success and reasons for failure in international working. These projects involved organisations and individuals in the higher education industry in 10 countries. This paper suggests that organisational culture and structure is a greater influence on individual attitude and behaviour than national culture. Individual attitude and behaviour is the key driver of success and relationship sustainability in international project working.

1. Introduction

This working paper emerges from the unique opportunity to evaluate a series of highly successful multi-partner international collaborations conducted over a period of 11 years – and ongoing - in higher education and industry. During this time a unique network of diverse personal and professional relationships has developed between individuals operating in the UK, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia and Korea where historically *"geographical distance has been compounded by psychological distance"* [1]. From origins in an experimental and small-scale student mobility co-operation of 7 partners, this loose network has developed and expanded into a 16-partner consortium running a complex research mobility project involving over 100 staff. In this 11-year period, total funding from the European Union and Korean Research Foundation exceeds €3 million and a pattern of sustained relationships has emerged at the heart of this success.

Increasingly, industries depend on a 'geographically dispersed workforce' [2] and so project teams are managed over long distances [3]. Communication is therefore central to the implementation of an international project via a team [4] [5]. Nowadays such international team communication is facilitated by technology [6]. Bailey and Cohen's [7] definition of a team is based on an

extensive review of definitions. It states that *»A team is a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and are seen by others as an intact social entity, embedded in one or more larger social systems and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries«* (p. 241). The diversity of a team comes both from the national cultures from which members originate and also from other subcultures and identities (e.g. organisational, professional, generational) [8]. Project implementation is therefore heavily influenced by national culture, organisational culture and the individual personalities involved. This working paper explores the relative importance of these forces, describing also their nature in the international projects in question.

1.1 Context

In 2008, the first projects were awarded funding by the 'Industrialized Countries Instrument –

Education Cooperation Programme' (ICI-ECP), launched to support joint mobility and degree opportunities between the EU and Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea. This fund started a remarkable series of increasingly complex and ambitious collaborations between a variety of European universities including Poland (P), Slovenia (SLO), the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland (RoI) and also Korean universities (SK) (for details see Table 1). This has expanded to include industry partners and, now that ICI-ECP is finished, the consortium has secured funding from other EU and Korean sources. The latest of these projects are currently underway and facilitate the close investigation of emerging issues in their implementation including personal, organisational, project-related and national cultural aspects of project management.

Table 1: Collaborative projects generating research data

Dates	Fund €	Funder	Aims	No of partners in each country					
				SK	P	SLO	UK	RoI	Other
2008-11	700k	ICI-ECP	Study & internships	3	1	1	1	0	1
2009-12	640k	ICI-ECP	Internships	3	1	0	0	0	3
2013-17	750k	ICI-ECP	Double degree	2	2	1	1	0	1
2016-20	1000k	H2020	Research & innovation staff exchange	3	4	3	3	3	0
2016-20	1000k	Erasmus+	Innovation capacity	1	0	1	0	3	6

2 Literature Review

2.1 Complexity and challenges of global projects

Teamwork has become the dominant form of work to handle complex tasks and projects. Nowadays, many projects can be labeled as global projects since they include people from different organisations working in various countries across the globe [9]. As such, global projects are a combination of international (members are from multiple countries) and virtual projects (members are dispersed geographically and extensively use electronic communication). In comparison to local and co-located project teams, global project teams have to deal with multiple dimensions that add complexity [9]: number of distant locations, number of different organisations, characteristics of country cultures, different languages,

and different time zones. For these reasons, they face some specific challenges.

Behfar et al. [10] suggest that same culture teams typically face five main challenges in working together: personality and communication conflict, differences of opinion about work, deciding on a work method or approach, issues with timing and scheduling, and problems with member contribution and workload distribution. In addition to these, the cultural dimension amplifies challenges due to differences in norms for problem solving and decision making, attitude towards time, urgency and pace, differences in work norms and behaviours, direct versus indirect confrontation. Then there are some challenges that are unique to cross-cultural teams, such as violations of respect and hierarchy, inter-group prejudices, lack of common ground, language fluency, and implicit vs. explicit communication.

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2.2 Diversity and effectiveness of teamwork

There is a vast area of research exploring the effectiveness of teamwork. For example, Adams et al. [11] propose seven elements that contribute to effective teamwork: common purpose, quantifiable clearly defined goals, role clarity, team climate, mature communication, productive conflict resolution, and accountable interdependence. Because team members interact interdependently, team performance depends on the processes within teams, e.g. motivation, cognition and socialisation [12]. Furthermore, research shows that team composition also plays a crucial role [13]. When researching the effects of team composition, researchers look at member characteristics such as demographics, personality, and ability [14] [15] [16] [17] [18] [19]. Researchers also distinguish between surface-level composition variables that can be easily observed (e.g. age, education level and ethnicity) and deep-level composition variables, which are underlying psychological characteristics (e.g. personality factors, values and attitudes), with results suggesting that deep level variables have a more profound effect on team performance [20] [21] [22].

Another stream of research looks at team composition in terms of team member diversity. Results often show both positive and negative sides of diversity [23] [24] [25]. Namely, diversity brings different experiences and multiple perspectives which add to team creativity and effective problem-solving. Diversity also makes team processes more complex and difficult to manage. Barjak and Robinson [26] studied scientific research projects and concluded that diverse skills, experience and cognitive frameworks enhance productivity, but at the same time make it more costly to communicate and build consensus. In their opinion too much diversity can be counterproductive.

Diversity is becoming an increasingly important topic for international teams due to the different cultural values of team members as possible sources of misunderstandings and conflict [27]. Stahl et al. [28] believe that current research on multicultural teams tends to be biased towards studying the negative effects of team diversity more than the positive. This prevents us finding mechanisms to exploit diversity for strength. Chevrier [29] proposed that differences in national culture might be of a lesser importance for the effective functioning of teams than personality. She claims that the members of cross-cultural teams need special personal qualities such as openness, patience, and self-control, and then they are able to make a positive use of diversity. Another well-documented condition for successful team work is trust among team members [30], especially for dispersed team members [31] [32]. Klimoski & Mohammed [33] argue that teams with a shared history, in which trust among members is already established, have an advantage over others. Not just due to trust but also familiarity with one another's habits, abilities and behaviours which helps them to work together effectively.

Consistent and routine communication can also contribute to effective cross-cultural teamwork [34] and different communication methods are needed for building relationships, developing trust and team cohesion [35] [36]. Face-to-face communication is especially important as it combines both verbal and non-verbal communication and as such is the richest communication channel [37] [38]. It has been proven that when team members become well acquainted with one another through face-to face meetings and social events they set up working arrangements more easily [29]. Because of the importance of good communication [39], it is also essential that teams are led by creative leaders with a collaborative leadership style and excellent communication skills [40].

In multi-lingual teams special attention must be paid to the issue of common project language. English is most often used as a project language, but as members' cultural background and linguistic fluency differ, this can lead to intercultural misunderstandings [41]. Research confirms that the use of language in cross-cultural teams is clearly associated with power and team dynamics [42] [43]. Also, language differences can be interpreted as personality problems or language fluency assimilated with scientific competence [44].

Finally, Iles & Hayers [45] believe that in order to realise potential synergies of cultural diversity, team members need to be interculturally competent, which includes understanding the differences in the team, being able to communicate across the differences, acknowledging stereotypes, valuing differences and synergizing those differences. Moon [46] also discovered that a higher level of team cultural intelligence diminishes the adverse effect of cultural diversity on multi-cultural team performance.

3. Methodology

The objective of the study is to explore a variety of factors influencing international project management. To produce the in-depth understanding required, qualitative methods were applied: individual and group interviews which produced 'thick data' about individual views, opinions and experiences [47] [48]. We used semi-structured interview scenarios that provided a certain level of formality with flexibility and facilitated building rapport with the respondents

[49] [50]. The topics discussed were divided into three modules: involvement in the project, memorable experiences and significant events, assessment of cooperation flow. Interviews were conducted in two stages: after the first year of working on the project (March-April 2018) and after the second year (February-March 2019). They took place in locations convenient to the respondents and typically lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. Due to the geographic distribution of the respondents, 8 interviews were conducted via Skype.

The sample comprised 28 respondents of eight nationalities (British, Chinese, Irish, Korean, Polish, Slovenian, Taiwanese and Tanzanian) who have co-operated in 4 different international projects. 16 of the respondents were women and 12 were men. All interviewees actively participated in the projects in various capacities such as researcher, administrator or industry partner. Detailed characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

The interviews were recorded with respondents' consent and transcribed verbatim. Then, a thematic approach was used to identify themes and patterns, as well as deviations. The data was coded iteratively to accommodate emerging themes by three authors and results were compared and discussed until an overall framework was developed [47].

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents

ID	gender	age	nationality	role	Type of interview*
R1	F	50-55	British	Researcher, administrator	IDI, FGI
R2	F	55-60	British	Business partner	IDI (S)
R3	M	55-60	British	Researcher	IDI, FGI
R4	M	50-55	British	Researcher	FGI
R5	M	50-55	British	Researcher	FGI
R6	F	50-55	Chinese	Researcher	IDI, FGI
R7	M	45-50	Irish	Researcher, administrator	IDI (S)
R8	F	30-35	Korean	Researcher	IDI
R9	F	35-40	Korean	Administrator	IDI (S)
R10	F	35-40	Korean	Administrator	IDI (S)
R11	F	30-35	Korean	Administrator	IDI (S)
R12	M	50-55	Korean	Researcher	IDI (S)
R13	M	40-45	Korean	Researcher	IDI (S)
R14	M	65-70	Korean	Researcher	IDI
R15	F	4045	Polish	Researcher, administrator	IDI, FGI
R16	M	40-45	Polish	Researcher	IDI, FGI
R17	M	30-35	Polish	Business partner	IDI, FGI
R18	M	40-45	Polish	Researcher	IDI
R19	F	40-45	Polish	Researcher	IDI (S), FGI
R20	F	35-40	Polish	Researcher	IDI
R21	F	30-35	Polish	Researcher, administrator	FGI
R22	F	25-30	Polish	Researcher	FGI
R23	F	65-70	Slovenian	Administrator	IDI
R24	F	35-40	Slovenian	Researcher, administrator	IDI, FGI
R25	F	25-30	Slovenian	Researcher	IDI
R26	M	40-45	Slovenian	Researcher	IDI
R27	F	25-30	Taiwanese	Researcher	FGI
R28	M	35-40	Tanzanian	Researcher	FGI

* IDI – individual interview, FGI – focus group interview, (S) – conducted via Skype.

4. Analysis of the results

The analysis of collected data led to identification of four major domains with a variety of themes within each. The themes reflect the level of the influence on international project management (cultural/national, related to the specificity of a project, organisational and individual/personal), as shown in figure 1 and discussed in following sections.
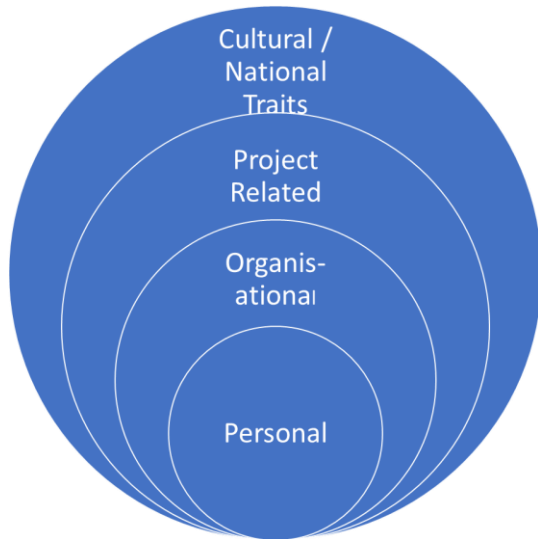
Figure 1. Major themes emerging from data

4.1 Personal factors

A particularly strong theme, central to team performance, is the decisive influence of personal factors. These factors can be subdivided into intra- and interpersonal. Intrapersonal factors are traits and characteristics of an individual participating in a project. Valuable are an openness to new experiences, agreeability, curiosity and optimism, as well as certain streaks of independence. In turn, interpersonal factors enable an individual to establish relationships and build social capital which consequently lead to further fruitful cooperation. The participants of our study particularly emphasized the importance of informal interactions, which not only allowed people to get to know each other, but also relax enough to conceive novel and ambitious ideas. Table 3 presents selected quotes as evidence of these personal factors.

Table 3. Illustrative quotes for personal factors

Intra-personal factors (traits)		Interpersonal factors	
Independence	*Going on a mobility for 2 months is not for everyone. After one week of 'sandpit' events, you are left all alone! [R20]*	Trust	*People don't appreciate that the trust develops between individuals, and it can't be transferred from one individual to another, except that if you're introduced by somebody who you trust [R23]*
Optimism	*People complain about going abroad, but I always say 'Well I didn't see it like that... I always see the positive.'*	Building relationships	*I think the longitudinal relationship helps, I think it would have been very difficult without it… There is a central group of people who've worked together for a long time. And I think that helps. There is certain honesty because we've worked together for a long time, there is an openness and transparency to everything" [R3]*
Curiosity	*I decided to take part in this project out of curiosity, really. I wanted to have a new experience and I was hoping for international networking and research cooperation [R19]*	Building social capital	*The job is done AFTER the meetings, not during the meetings. We have fun when we drink and then we say 'let's do something together'.* *We are sitting relaxing together, but we are also discussing work.*
Respect	*We were approached with respect and we gave back respect. We didn't judge – we just made the projects together. We just did it with our hearts. We respected differences. We didn't judge.*		*The biggest mistake is to think that talking, eating and drinking together is a waste of time.*

4.2 Organisational factors

Another emerging theme refers to organisational factors that can either facilitate or impede management of international projects. There are two sources of sources influence on project management: 'home' or partner institutions. According to our respondents, the differences between institutions in the same country can be more significant than between different countries. Each organisation brings their own culture and (often unwritten) rules and regulations that can have a strong and direct impact on cooperation. Table 3 presents selected quotes for organisational factors.

Table 4. Illustrative quotes for organisational factors

Home institution		Partner institution	
Exercising pressure	*There was a lot of unnecessary stress coming from my home institution [R20]*	Host's offer	*For me, the most successful event was the PhD meeting organised by the hosting institution: very useful in terms of shared research development [R25]*
Paperwork	*The number of documents you have to produce to make things happen is insane [R15]*	Paperwork, new procedures	*Going through an ethical approval process is a certain challenge. I know they need it, but we do not have such a procedure, so it's all new and different. The paperwork and uncertainty… [R16]*
General	*It is the differences between institutions and organisations that really effect how we work together – much more than so-called national culture differences: and it is much harder to work out an internal culture than to read some generalised stereotypes about other nations [R1]*		

4.3 Project-related factors

Every project comes with a set of requirements and rules that must be followed, as well as a level of complexity. In the case of international projects, especially those funded by public bodies, formal mandatory requirements can be well-defined and inflexible. As our respondents claim, longitudinal cooperation between institutions and especially individuals helps to deal with the new and overcome the unknown. Sometimes with a high level of bureaucracy and required documentation to satisfy funding bodies, goodwill is an important requirement in participants. A factor mentioned by our respondents as the one that facilitates the management of international projects is certain continuity in terms of people involved – both from the administrative and participant perspective. These thoughts are illustrated by the quotes below:

"The earlier projects we did were simpler and more flexible. I would not want to do this latest complex, structured and demanding project with people I didn't know personally.

"Introducing a lot of new people we did not necessarily know into a project has caused the most challenge, difficulty and risk."

4.4 Cultural/national traits

Last but not least, this group of factors comprises cultural and national traits that influence people and project management at the most general level. The respondents in our study talked about both similarities and differences at the same time. The main topics discussed referred to national languages, different customs and ways of doing things.

Table 5. Illustrative quotes for cultural/national traits

Similarities		Differences	
Language	*I feel way more comfortable talking to Slovenians than the British, I simply get what they mean when they say it. But it's different with*	Language	*Also, the language barrier... I thought I will understand most of Polish because it's a Slavic language, so I'll manage somehow, but it was not like that [R26]*

	British people I know, we actually share some expressions and jokes which are probably incorrect, but we get them" [R15]		
Customs	*I expected cultural differences before I came to Europe. But after 10 years I actually realised quite recently that it's all the same […] There is etiquette in Europe too – maybe slightly different – the fundamental manners and values are the same […]" [R8]*	Customs	*We understand about Korean culture, but we can't do it naturally. It's not obvious to us so we are always nervous. We are trying not to upset people. We are trying to behave properly but we don't really know how what we are supposed to do and not do and how to pay respect to people" [R1]*
	Westerners can come to Korea alone and try to find their way by maps or geography, but usually oriental people are very dependent on each other. […] Koreans, when they travel to Western society, they want to find a good friend, even in business. […] A UK person comes to Korea just with his namecard and walks into the building and says 'hello'. Koreans try to organise their schedules very well the first time and he tries to find a 'good guy' to introduce him or her to the company." [R14]		*We had an experience of some team building and went to karaoke. It was assumed that this is something that lecturers will be very much able to do, because they are outspoken, etc. However, this caused an issue with one of the lecturers who not only didn't like it, but effectively sat there and looked extremely annoyed and felt very uncomfortable. And as a result, their involvement in the project from that moment on effectively died" [R7]*

5. Conclusion

Our working paper proposes strongly that the decisive influence on the success of project implementation, and the ease of achieving that success, are the personality factors. We go beyond Chevrier's [29] suggestion that these might be more important than national culture, for example. In an established global team, national differences are eliminated by the relationships between individuals who share those 'deep-level' [20,21,22] traits she identifies. We go beyond Klimowski & Mohammed's [33] useful observations on trust and familiarity to suggest that these overrule national cultural differences, which start to exist more in the stereotyped assumptions of less experienced project participants and become confused with language. The development of this work will focus on the role of organisational cultures and how much these influence or even decide individual behaviour. We will also investigate the extent to which a focus on building social capital in our project history has produced a high-functioning team [29] and how this can be maintained and extended through a greater team operating under increased complexity and performance pressure.

5.1 Limitations and directions for further research

This study has certain limitations. First of all, we are aware that the use of English for data collection might create language bias resulting from various cultural accommodations and lack of participants' confidence in responding in a non-native language [51]. Secondly, the effect of prior relationships [52] could be at play given the roles of interviewers and interviewees in the projects. The study is of qualitative nature and thus results cannot be generalised. Instead, we propose that the descriptive information of the context supplied allows 'transcontextual credibility' [53] and therefore high transferability [48]. Further research might usefully apply quantitative experimental techniques to establishing the precise personality traits in existence and their relative importance to various aspects important to the performance of these projects as the consortium develops.

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