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IKEA: Crossing Borders

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ABSTRACT

The organizational culture differs widely among the countries in the world. IKEA has a very special culture which is one of its competitive advantages and used in their organizations in the countries they are situated in. This research is about how IKEA handles their organizational culture in the border crossing and what problems that may come in the way. It is mainly focused on the implementation strategy and the cultural differences that have created both success and obstacles when IKEA with its "culture carriers" are expanding their organization into other countries.

KEYWORDS

Organizational Culture, Border Crossing, IKEA, Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION

Down in the deepest forests of southern Sweden there was a little boy who sold pencils in a garage, his name is Ingvar Kamprad. This little business of his was to become the giant furniture company named IKEA. Influenced by a scarce lifestyle and farmer society, IKEA has formed a special organizational culture. Moreover, they have managed to enter several markets but still keeping their culture without bigger adjustments. How does it really work for a culture to cross borders?

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to describe the importance of organizational culture, especially within multinational companies and in particularly the case of IKEA. When a multinational company enters a new country, how does the organizational culture handle the border crossing?

Ingvar Kamprad Elmtaryd Agunnaryd

IKEA was founded in 1943 by Ingvar Kamprad in the south of Sweden in a department called Småland. During this time he was only selling pencils, clocks and jewelry, wallets, frames, and pantihose. Everything that was demanded he tried to find at a low cost to be able to sell it at a low price (IKEA 2008-a).

The name IKEA is taken from the founder's initials and the first letter of the name of the farm where he grew up and the village where he is from, Ingvar Kamprad Elmtaryd Agunnaryd. Ingvar Kamprad started to create his business when he was only six years old, by selling matches to his neighbors. The business grew gradually every year and today is one of the world's biggest furniture companies. The story of IKEA can always be connected with the characteristics of the scarce environment and the childhood that Ingvar lived in the south of Sweden. In addition, the organizational culture and concept of IKEA that Ingvar created is still characterized by the roots of his life (Björk 1998).

"Ingvar's innovative idea was to offer home furnishing products of good function and design at prices much lower than the competitors by using simple cost-cutting solutions that did not affect the quality of products." (IKEA, 2008-b).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
Organizational culture

Culture is often related to people from different countries, language, rituals, myths etc. This behavior has also been observed among societies and organization members which have their own rituals and way to express their belonging to that certain organization (Daulatram 2003). Since organizational culture reflects

the organizations personality, organizational culture is a very important part of every organization, even though is it a small national company or a multinational company (McNamara, 2000). According to Md Zabid Abdul Rashid, Murali Sambasivan and Azmawani Abdul Rahman (2003) culture with its different beliefs and behaviors move into the organization culture to form attitudes, behaviors and values within the organization. The culture within the organization reflects its personality through assumptions, values and norms through the members of the organization and the way they behave (McNamara, 2000). When you meet a person, you could reveal his or her personality. The same way, you could see the culture of the organization through furniture, clothing, expressions etc. Of course, this differs from a company to another, especially if the company is small or large. The organizational culture shows guidelines and ideals for the people within the organization and creates a larger understanding for how the organization operates and takes decisions. It is also a great help for the communication which is a very important part of every organization and makes it easier for the organization to keep together as one (Alvesson & Berg, 1988). One of the most prominent theorists of organizational culture, Edgar Schein (2004) define the culture of a group as: "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2004). As written by Taormina (2007), organizations could be divided into three types; Bureaucratic with its hierarchy and highly regulated structure; innovative which are enterprising, creative, risk-taking and result orientated; supportiveness that are sociable, trusting and with collaborative behaviors. Hence, organizations may not just consist of one type but can include parts from all different types (Taormina, 2007).

According to Advernire AB (--), culture within the organization can appear in different ways, and it can be clear, unclear, strong and weak. One can structure the organizational culture in several possible situations.

> Hypothesis 1. The culture is very clear but unspoken, informal rules for example that have been created by employees who have been in the organization for a longer time. It may be hard for a person to enter the organization and not see the informal cultural rules that are important to those who have been in the organization for a longer period of time and have their way of working.

> Hypothesis 2. The culture is outspoken but unclear. This often leads to confusion and ends up in subcultures within the organization and the employees find their own way of organizational culture.

> Hypothesis 3. The culture is unspoken and unclear and can be hard to work efficiently as a group. Suspicions and insecurity makes it difficult to believe in each other and could lead to conflicts hard to handle. (Advenire AB, --)

Organizational culture differs widely among companies. A strong organizational culture is clearly a positive thing to have but could also be difficult to transfer when entering new countries (Alvesson & Berg 1988). On the other hand, in a weak and unclear culture values and beliefs are not transmitted to the whole organization and organizational members have little knowledge about the organization's history, symbols are multiple and inconsistent and there are no norms to keep the organization together (Driskill & Brenton, 2005).

As presented by Hofstede (2009) there are five cultural dimensions: *Power Distance Index* which means that power is distributed unequally and that all societies are unequal: *Individualism* and its opposite Collectivism that can be applied to societies in the whole world. Masculinity and feminism and the role distribution among them. *Uncertainty Avoidance Index* or the search for the truth helped by laws and regulations to minimize uncertainty whilst Uncertainty Accepting Avoidance refers to the opposite and the fifth dimension is the *Long-Term Orientation*, which is related to thrift and perseverance as the opposite short term orientation connected to respect for tradition (Hofstede, 2009).

It is hard to know how people in other countries behave and a common thought is that all human beings are the same regardless the country and the culture. From this we take decisions based on how it would be done in our home country, which could be very misleading if the information is directed to people with a completely different way of handling this kind of issues (Hofstede, 2009). Although an organization must manage both organizational culture and national culture, organizational culture is more manageable than national since national culture is given facts (Hofstede, 2009). According to Webster and Sundaram, organizations that have a culture reflecting their home countries may have difficulties in the new countries where it is hard for the people with a different culture to understand procedures of the foreign organization which could evolve in a lower outcome and a lower customer satisfaction. In Japan for example, harmony, long term-relationships and people orientation are some of the cultural factors that also are important within the organizations. Common organization cultures make it easier for multinational companies to cross borders, enter new countries and still hold them together (Hofstede, 2009). In some multinational organizations appears an Academic Culture, which means that the company has an organizational culture where the employees stay within the company where they have a stable environment

and the possibility to develop and advance (McNamara, 2000). This is a part of how the Swedish multinational company IKEA is organized.

The IKEA culture

The IKEA culture began its creation directly from the start and has been developed since then. In addition several of the main values were established during the 1950s. What today is the organizational culture was from the beginning Ingvar Kamprad's thoughts and way to think. For him the problems are the sources of opportunities. He tried to find solutions to the problems as they arrived and already in the beginning he formed concepts and values of simplicity and fellowship that symbolizes IKEA today.

More deeply described Ingvar Kamprad created a simple business that the customers easily understood and adapted to. IKEA started as a mail-order company selling pencils, Christmas cards and other things at a low price which he later enriched with personalized furniture at a low cost produced in Småland. Soon due to the business success this was not sustainable and Ingvar Kamprad had to reorganize his business which he changed to a retailing furniture company. His products were presented in IKEA – *Nytt* which later was to become the IKEA catalogue. In 1953 he opened the first showroom in Älmhult, which became the start of the IKEA store. There are several characteristics created during the process. Firstly, the different furniture was given names instead of a long item number, to make it easier for the customers to remember them. Secondly, in the showroom people were able to try the items and feel them before they bought them. At the time this was revolutionary and appreciated. Thirdly, to make the buying process more comfortable, he introduced a child care facility to families with small children. Lastly, in the IKEA stores all over the world you can buy hotdogs or other Swedish dishes for a small cost, the underlying thought is that "no one does good business on an empty stomach". Ingvar Kamprad's idea was that his customers should have a pleasant experience without stress in his store (Rothacher, 2004).

Moreover, Ingvar Kamprad is a person that always thinks of the costs and does not like to spend money unnecessarily (Kamprad, 1976; Rothacher, 2004). He is one of the world's richest persons and still he travels in economy class, uses discounts and he does not mind staying in a hotel with bad standard. If he would change his lifestyle, the picture of the low-cost company could be jeopardized. In addition, he believes that practicing what he preaches is very important for good leadership (Rothacher, 2004).

Another important concept of IKEA is the equality in the dress code of the workers. There were no barriers between the different groups within the organization;

directors and employees look the same (Björk, 1998). During the early years Ingvar Kamprad knew the names of all his employees and treated them as friends and equals. This closeness was a way for him to build up a trust. Directors and employees from different countries liked his way to treat them as family members and started to act the same way to their coworkers (Rothacher, 2004). In addition, when a new worker starts at IKEA there is an introduction period during which the worker gets implemented in to what the organization stands for, value, vision and mission. The worker should emphasize these things to the customer and always keep them in mind. One important value of IKEA is that they believe that everybody is equal and for that reason there are worker uniforms. As a customer you cannot see who is superior to another by just looking at them. This makes the workers feel as a family member and feel the importance in his/her work.

During the 1970's IKEA expanded at a high speed and this affected the culture in a negative way. The board feared that the company could lose its soul due to several reasons, such as increased costs, quality problems and tendencies to bureaucracy, things that were not significant for IKEA. This led to the creation of "Kraft 80" a program developed to revise critically the whole organization from within and in turn rebuild the organization. From this moment on IKEA saw the value in preserving their culture, which today is used as a management tool (Björk, 1998).

All in all the IKEA culture is based in strong values from the farmer society in southern Sweden. Some significant word to describe it are: Commonsense, Simplicity, Thrift, Enthusiastic, Fellowship and Humbleness. Today the culture is a competitive advantage for the company (Björk, 1998). In 1976 Ingvar Kamprad developed the document "En möbel handlares testamente" in English "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer" where his thoughts and ideas about the corporate culture and management are summarized. In nine theses the company's vision, assortment, strategy and management philosophy is described. These are the base for the organizational culture and values that should identify IKEA and be a help for the employees to keep the "IKEA-spirit" (Björk, 1998; Kamprad, 1976). These are:

1. The product range – our identity
2. The IKEA-spirit – a strong and living reality
3. Profit gives us resources.
4. Reaching good results with small means.
5. Simplicity is a virtue
6. Doing it a different way.
7. Concentration – important to our success.
8. Taking responsibility – a privilege.
9. Most things still remain to be done - A glorious future!

The script has later been completed with a dictionary with words associated with the IKEA-spirit, such as the ones mentioned above. They are explained so that the IKEA worker can look them up and be guided to what IKEA stands for and in turn be able to transmit the true message to the customer.

3. IKEA & ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE
Comparison

Miriam Salzer-Mörling is a doctor at the University of Stockholm at the Business Institution. She did a study for IKEA, investigating the organizational culture in Sweden, France and Canada. During her observations she found that the culture lost its strength with the geographical location (Salzer, 1994). In another book *"Cases in international organizational behavior"* (Oddou, G.R. & Mendenhall, M.A. 1998), the Human Resource Management is discussed in an international perspective. The recruitment process is important in the matter of finding people that know and understand the values of IKEA. They search for people that think alike; knows how to listen, with abilities to transmit knowledge, do not think of oneself as better than the other and have curiosity of what is going on around them (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1998). In Sweden this is not difficult due to the closeness of the IKEA culture to the national culture. Salzer (1994) found that the values and the IKEA-spirit were well known among all the workers and a majority had read "The testament of a furniture dealer" and knew the company vision by heart. Moreover they also find it important that the boss is around on the floor and show a good example instead of just spending the time in the office. To show a good example is a good way to lead. To diminish the hierarchic distance and emphasize the equal relationship between directors and employees, they call each other by the first name only, which is very normal for Swedes (Salzer, 1994).

In France the awareness of the organizational culture was rather high and Sweden was an important and valued influence there. Some of the workers were skeptical to the culture since they considered it a bit idealistic, not showing the correct picture of the company (Salzer, 1994). In Germany the management style was considered too flat sometimes and very informal, a fact which have frightened the German workers. The management is supposed to facilitate the procedures and implicate security for the worker (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1998). Furthermore in France vertical differentiations was more significant and it was rare to see the bosses on the floor, although IKEA was less hierarchic then other French companies (Salzer, 1994). The management strategy used in Sweden, that the bosses show a good example to lead their coworkers did not really work in France. French people do not consider the "learning-by-doing" formal enough, they require pro-

grams that are more professional (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1998). Additionally, the informality between the bosses and workers was for them difficult to adjust to since they are used to more formal relationships at work (Salzer, 1994).

In Canada the IKEA culture was even less known among the workers and the nine theses were rarely mentioned (Salzer, 1994). Like in France and Germany the vertical differentiation among workers in Canada and USA was more emphasized (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1998; Salzer, 1994). However, In Canada the workers seemed to appreciate the informal clothing and to be called by the first name (Salzer, 1994). Salzer (1994) points that an organizational culture is built both from above and from under. The company board can influence the organizational culture broadly but still the people in the different departments form the culture in that department. So the official organizational culture is one thing and the culture within an individual department is another (Salzer, 1994). In addition, it is important to take into consideration the role of implementing the IKEA culture in the different countries. It is found that this might become a more challenging task as the international expansion increases. Often IKEA sends Swedish manager and workers to the new establishments to communicate the culture and values. Moreover it is found that non-Scandinavians have a harder time to growing within the organization. This is due to the high knowledge requirements of the IKEA culture (Oddou & Mendenhall 1998).

IKEA studies

In a bachelor thesis (Keyassa & Truong, 2005) that studies the implementation of IKEA's organizational culture we found interviews made with different people working at IKEA. They all have experiences of working in different countries and the questions are well suited for the study that we are making over IKEA. Here we will interpret them.

1. How is IKEA using management and what are the importance of it when implementing the organizational culture in other countries?

The management is used as a guidance to keep balance in the distribution of work and also to signalize that there are no hierarchy but a certain way to lead. The bosses are supposed to show good examples of how they do things at IKEA and be present among the workers. There should not be a long distance between decisions and actions. In addition concerning the implementation of the organizational culture the management is very essential. Due to the cultural differences the boss has the task to guide the new workers and teach them what the IKEA culture is all about. This is done by showing good examples instead of demanding.

2. Is the organizational culture used as a sophisticated thinking or practical use in the company? Is there any adjustment of the organizational culture in other countries?

The organizational culture is used in the everyday work and the nine theses are central in the work. The symbols, such as the theses and the key words that describe the culture are essential and help implementing the culture since they are easy to communicate. The leadership is very important to keep the culture intact and transmit it into the new company entity. Moreover, there are no adjustments made over the borders and to preserve the culture IKEA usually sends culture-carriers which are people with good knowledge of the IKEA culture and the culture of the new market. These people play a role as guiders together with the bosses. Also mentioned is that in the franchise stores the culture loses its importance more than in the directly owned stores.

3. How important is it to understand the cultural differences when implementing the organizational culture in a new country?

It is of great importance to have knowledge about the new culture, especially when it comes to communication. To understand how other people from other cultures act facilitates the implementing of the IKEA culture. It is about understanding the culture and use it to communicate with coworkers.

Here there are some examples from the same study as mentioned earlier (Keyassa & Truong, 2005). During the interviews the people interviewed provided some examples from their personal experiences.

• Problems that occurred in Japan were that the Japanese have difficulties adjusting to the fact that coworkers call each other by the first name, which is not common in the Japanese culture. Also a Japanese worker normally wait for an order from the boss before taking action, this does not work at IKEA.

• In Italy during the recruitment period the Italians applying for higher positions came wearing tuxedos to the interviews. Of course they were told during the talk that this is not the case at IKEA, all workers dress the same way. After the selection when the education process began, the new Italian coworkers still came wearing tuxedos. During the first day they were showed to their new offices and asked to go get a desk and put it up on their own. This resulted in that some of them quit, to put up their own desk was not in their values for a director's position.

• In China the hierarchy is very strong and workers are waiting to get orders before doing things and they are also afraid of making mistakes, to make a mistake is to lose their face. IKEA had to teach them that it is ok to make a mistake, it is a part of the process of learning and develop oneself.

Hofstede's dimensions

As mentioned in the literature review Hofstede (2009) has five dimensions, which are used to describe cultures. In various studies these are used to understand differences between countries and cultures. In the following section the IKEA culture will be explained according to these dimensions.

Power distance

According to Bannister (2004) the power distance is low in IKEA. The organizational structure has a limited hierarchy and although the roles are defined within the working force they can change easily. It is highly motivated to have experience from different layer in the organization (Bannister, 2004). The flat organization that symbolizes IKEA facilitates the development and increases productivity and engagement among the coworkers (Keyassa & Truong, 2005). Faith between coworkers and bosses is of significant importance and this in turn makes it possible to give more responsibility to the lower layers in the organization (Bannister, 2004). The boss has the assignment to coach the workers; however it is important to keep some power to be able to keep a good management. It is understood that the low power distance that IKEA has, has been one of the biggest challenges for the company when crossing borders (Keyassa & Truong, 2005).

Individualism

The general idea is that IKEA act collectivistic and that fellowship is an important element in the whole organization (Keyassa & Truong, 2005). In addition, the IKEA's staff vision, which is based in giving simple, honest people the opportunity to develop individually as well as professionally, also talks for reciprocity. However, the individual needs to take responsibility and is justified to do so by the managers. This is understood as part of the IKEA spirit and the values that give the organization its meaning (Bannister, 2004).

Masculinity

According to the results from the interviews in the study made by Keyassa & Truong, (2005) the IKEA culture is described as feminine. This refers to the second theses "The true IKEA spirit is still built...from our humbleness in approaching our task and from the simplicity of our way of doing things. We must look after each other and inspire each other" (Kamprad, 1976). IKEA seems to have a feminine style when it comes to the original culture however some strokes of masculinity are found in other countries that have other national culture (Bannister, 2004).

Uncertainty Avoidance

IKEA has a low level of Uncertainty avoidance, the workers are given responsibility and they are expected to do their best after their abilities (Keyassa & Truong, 2005). A high level of Uncertainty Avoidance is often connected to societies with higher level bureaucracy and with longer distance to the manager, or more respect for him/her. This has been the case in other countries than Sweden (Bannister, 2004). IKEA does not fear to face problems as it is those that create the opportunities. This way of thinking is used under the implementation of the IKEA culture in other countries (Keyassa & Truong, 2005).

4. METHODOLOGY

To be able to work with the purpose of this research, we decided to begin by defining based on academic literature, what organizational culture really is to continue by examining the organizational culture of IKEA. With examples from IKEA, we can implement the theory to see how it works in the real organizational life of IKEA.

In this paper, a qualitative method will be used and information will be found in the cultural and historical knowledge rather than numbers and statistics. By this, a deeper research on how IKEA implements its organizational culture in other countries can be made. In addition, a well informative book about IKEA and its organizational culture. To obtain information about organizational culture in general, the authors have been looking in to several academic Internet pages and the webpage of IKEA; this is done in order to get information from multiple sources and receive a broader view about the subject. Since there is access to both the database of EAFIT and the database from the university the authors come from in Linköping, Sweden, there is a lot of information to choose from, which is useful to see how different writers define and write about our specific topic. By taking information from all these sources listed in the references, the information is considered as reliable, although it is hard to exactly define organizational culture and how it differs from a company to another. In addition, relevant information has been found in papers written by other people (Bannister, 2004; Keyassa & Truong 2005) on IKEA's culture. Also, one of the authors has ethnographical experience in IKEA from when she worked within the organization.

5. ANALYSIS

Looking at the three different types of organizations as defined by Taormina (2007): Bureaucratic, innovative and supporting, it can be seen that IKEA is mostly of the innovative and supporting types since their management is not of a traditional style and the directors have a role of guidance which has been in the organization since

the beginning. Ingvar Kamprad has always treated his coworkers as family members. On the contrary, this way of organization is perceived differently depending on the organizational culture that workers in other countries are used to.

IKEA's organizational culture is clear, strong and outspoken. Because of the book "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer and a Little IKEA Dictionary", norms and values are made very clear and are taught from the beginning. This makes it very easy for a new employee to enter the organizational culture, to understand and to communicate with his or her coworkers. IKEA has a very strong organizational culture and use it as a competitive advantage when entering new countries. Although, as found by Salzer (1994) as further away from Sweden, the core location, the organizational culture has less impact and is not as recognized by the workers as it is in its country of origin.

Regarding Hofstede's five dimensions, there are some aspects to discuss. Concerning the Power Distance Index, IKEA works to have as little distance as possible which also can be one of the biggest obstacles during establishments in countries that are used to a larger distance and a more hierarchic structure. IKEA is working collectivistic rather than individualistic since humbleness and fellowship, which are two significant words, are related to collectivism. Although everyone has their own responsibility, they should also agree with all decisions. This could slow down the process, but since the director works close to their coworkers they should know everyone's opinions and take that into account, a factor which could hurry up the process as well. The organizational culture is based on words and symbols with female characteristics such as "humbleness" and to "look after each other". In addition, the organization works towards equality and would be contradictory if there are large differences between men and women in the organization. One of the main ideas from IKEA and Ingvar Kamprad is that problems are the sources to opportunities and always work to find a solution. This is a sign that IKEA does not avoid uncertainty but work to find the truth. Considering the Long-Term Orientation, one of the key words of IKEA is thrift and can be noticed all through the organization. Furthermore, the culture carriers are a tool that IKEA uses to implement and preserve the culture in other countries.

Today Ingvar Kamprad is still active in the life of IKEA, but this will not be the case forever. What are the risks that IKEA will lose its soul? The answer to that question is not easy but of vital significance. As mentioned by Oddou & Mendenhall (1998) it has been difficult for non-Scandinavians to climb within the organization and the reasons found are that it requires a good knowledge of the IKEA culture and in turn the Swedish culture. This requirement is on one hand easy to understand, if a person works with the management, the higher levels of the organization. He/she

must be able to transmit the philosophy and values of IKEA. These are found in the culture and therefore their knowledge is necessary. On the other hand, this requirement signalizes that IKEA needs to implement their culture with more efforts to be able to welcome other non-Scandinavian coworkers to the higher levels of the organization.

6. MODEL
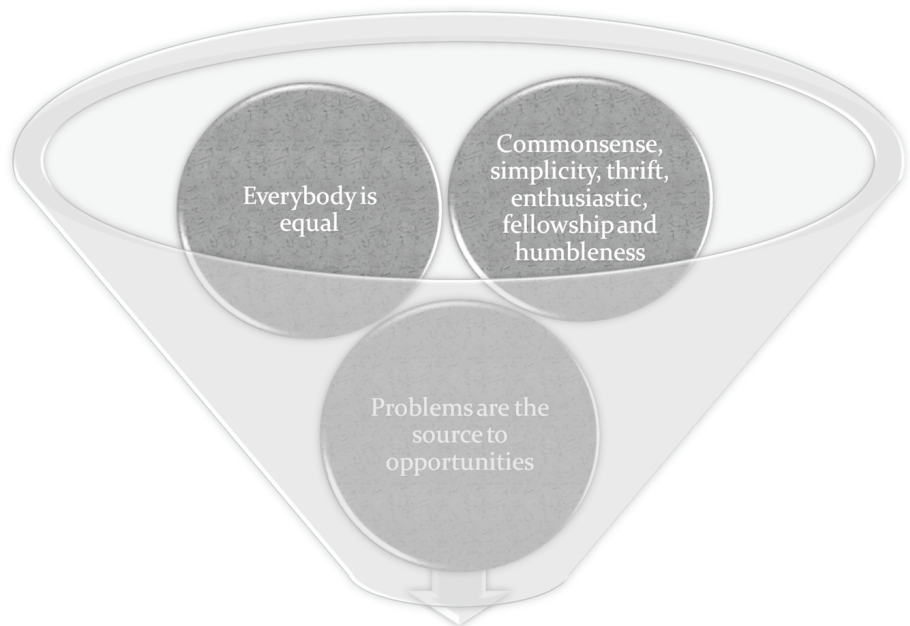
The IKEA culture

Source: Model developed by the authors.

Description of the model

IKEA's many values are of great importance for the company. Everyone within the company is aware of all values and their importance. From the start, the new employee is educated to always think of these norms and values. Some of the most important values that are of significant importance are those in the figure above. Everybody is equal is an informal rule and is used for all employees, it does not matter if you are Ingvar Kamprad or an employee working in the register. Everybody is treated with the same respect. Commonsense, simplicity, thrift, enthusiastic, fellowship and humbleness are words with a deep meaning and expected to be a part of the atmosphere in every corner of IKEA. These problems are the source to opportunities has been a motto for Ingvar Kamprad since he started to do business in his early years and has become an important thought for IKEA. These values amongst others have formed what today is the very special IKEA culture, used and known all over the world.

7. CONCLUSION

In Sweden where IKEA is originated, its organizational culture is very strong, clear and implemented from the beginning in the employees and employers and is also widely spread to the people in Sweden. In other cultures, the reception of the IKEA culture is different and even though IKEA has good guidance it may not be as strong and clear for people in those countries. Both national culture and organizational culture are very different from country to county and it is an important aspect that IKEA has to consider when entering new countries.

To implement the IKEA culture in countries, culture carriers from Sweden are being used to facilitate the transmission of the special culture and integrate it in the new country. Although the culture carriers are a big part of the implementation, the organizational culture is not always received equally in all countries and has led to difficulties in for example China, where hierarchy is very strong and workers wait to get orders and are afraid to make mistakes.

IKEA is known for having a strong culture and a special way of doing things; this is spread not only in Sweden but also in other parts of the world. The culture might be less strong in some parts and in some cases more mixed with the national culture of the particular country. Concerning the future of IKEA and their coming expansions it might be favorable to put more effort in implementing the culture more profoundly. People from other cultures have expressed different perceptions and thoughts, both positive and negative, about the culture and the IKEA way of working. Consequently the mix with the national culture might be an advantage to be able to respond to the clients in the best possible way. However, to be able to give other nationalities better opportunities to grow within the organization, IKEA needs to transmit their culture better or maybe introduce aspects of the national cultures where it operates.

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