

CULTURAL ISSUES IN PERSONNEL SELECTION

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Seleksi personil dalam suatu organisasi akan semakin kompleks, manakala organisasi tersebut berada pada lingkungan global. Organisasi global akan menghadapi adanya perbedaan kultur dari berbagai belahan dunia. Artikel ini akan membahas implikasi perbedaan kultur terhadap perilaku dalam bekerja di suatu organisasi dan kebutuhan akan kriteria seleksi personil yang spesifik dalam konteks multikultural.

Dalam artikel ini digunakan lima dimensi kultural untuk menganalisis kemungkinan adanya acaman validitas eksternal dalam pengambilan keputusan keputusan seleksi personil. Kelima dimensi kultural tersebut adalah individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculine-feminine, and polycronic-monochornic.

Berdasarkan kelima dimensi kultural tersebut, penulis mencoba untuk memformulasikan suatu pedoman strategi seleksi yang dapat digunakan dalam pengambilan keputusan seleksi personal pada suatu organisasi global.

Keywords: working behavior; personnel selection; five cultural; external validity

Personnel selection is an important part of organization systems and processes. In fact it is the primary element of organizational processes. If an organization fails in this first step, the subsequent processes will not be effective. Further processes such as training, job redesign, employee involvement program, or even performing the basic job function will be difficult when the selection is done poorly.

Issues on personnel selection become more complex, when an organization is put into a global environment. A global organization is challenged with diversities of cultures in various part of the world. Within a multicultural context, its complexity may result from a question on the possibility to find a proper match between the selected personnel and the different cultures of the organizations where they

may be located. Selection practice of this type of organization may appear in two forms, i.e. selecting employees to be sent to a foreign country as expatriates, and selecting local employees in a foreign branch office. Then, at this level, it is relevant to explore the factors—related to culture and skills—which need to be considered in the selection practices to enhance the right matching. Best selection practices performed in one country, may not be suitable for other country, regarding its cultural specificity and the relevant skills required.

So far, researches in cultural differences had shown that cultural values play a significant role in the work place (e.g. Hofstede, 1984; Riyono, 1996; Shane, 1995; Liouville and Nanopoulos, 1996). Based on the findings on cultural influ-

ences in work behavior, Michael (1997) listed 18 propositions that match specific managerial behaviors with cultural work values. He categorized management behaviors into five elements, i.e. decision-making behaviors, relationship-oriented behaviors, communicating behaviors, motivating behaviors, and influencing tactics. The effectiveness to perform those five elements of management behavior is dependent upon where it takes place, or in what cultural groups it is done. Managers from different cultural background might find it difficult to perform well without proper understanding of the local culture, even though he/she is the best manager in his/her home culture.

Since the effectiveness of behavior or job performance is the ultimate purpose of selection programs, criteria in selection processes need to be adjusted by including specific characteristics of the culture where the organization is located. The purpose of this paper is to formulate selection strategies for overseas placement or local hire on overseas subsidiaries or joint ventures, considering local cultural values. The paper will begin with a description of the five dimensions of culture, then followed by the propositions for the criteria for successful working behavior in particular cultural setting, and examples of the application of the criteria in a particular country, which has a combination of the five dimensions of culture.

Five Dimensions of Culture

There are five dimensions of culture that has been found as related to work values and influencing work behavior. Four of them were introduced by Hofstede (1984): individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. The fifth dimension was intro-

duced by Hall and Hall (cited in Michael, 1997), i.e. polychronic and monochronic.

The individualism/collectivism dimension deals with how individual perceive their role in the organization or community. Individualistic society assumes individual responsibilities and rights as the strongest values in social interaction. Individuals are encouraged to take action and initiative on their own behalf. Collectivist society stresses the importance of duties to the community or organization rather than rights. In collectivist society individuals are expected to be a member of certain group or organization and making decision based on consensus. As a result they have less individual accountability to the decisions made. Blaming individual on organizational mistakes would not be considered appropriate (Hofstede, 1984).

There are five dominant values in individualistic culture: freedom or individual rights, justice or equity, hedonism, social status, and honesty, while on the other side, collectivist culture also possesses five dominant values: harmony, moderation or equality, humility or duty, consideration or thoughtfulness, and thrift or conservation (Riyono, 1996).

The power distance dimension refers to the perceived relationship between different status/positions in an organization/community. A society with a high power distance has a strict hierarchy of status and centralized power. A society with a low power distance is more egalitarian, less hierarchical and decentralized power (Hofstede, 1984).

The uncertainty avoidance dimension refers to the degree to which people can deal with uncertain and ambiguous situations. A society with high uncertainty avoidance feels threatened by uncertainty and therefore creates mechanisms to reduce risk. In the workplace, these mecha-

nisms can be in the form of job security and well-defined work rules and regulations. On the other hand, a society with low uncertainty avoidance has higher tolerance to ambiguity and assumes risks (Hofstede, 1984).

The masculinity dimension refers to the degree to which a society holds traditionally related sexual values. Traditional masculine values such as assertiveness, achievement, and performance are dominant in a masculine society. A society which stresses the values of quality of life, congenial atmosphere, and cooperation among members is categorized as having a feminine culture (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997).

The polychronic/monochronic dimension deals with different patterns of thinking among different cultural groups. A polychronic culture places a high value on commitment to people and maintaining interpersonal relationships, rather than on commitment to time or schedule. A tight schedule is perceived to be disruptive to interpersonal relationships, so time commitment is usually sacrificed for the sake of maintaining relationships with others. Deep involvement with others is important in order to be sure of giving appropriate service, for example to clients, friends or employees. Information exchanges occurs in a high context environment, where most of the information is implicitly understood by participants (Hall and Hall cited in Michael, 1997). When communicating new ideas or suggestion, and particularly when asking a favor, they will start with describing the context first, so the listener, having a broader understanding of the context or background will be able to imply what is really the point.

Monochronic culture values linear, rationally based paradigm to cope with problems. Cause-effect relationship is an important way of thinking, which is en-

couraged in education and social interaction. Schedule commitment is a serious matter, to the extent that interpersonal relationships tend to be short-term. Information processes occur in a low context environment, where significant amounts of information must be explicitly transmitted for effective communication to occur (Hall and Hall cited in Michael, 1997). Being straightforward and to the point is the prescription of an effective communication, followed by the reasoning behind that point or the "why". In a polychronic culture understanding the "why" first is important, and then the point will follow, sometimes not explicitly. In other words, a polychronic culture has a circular communication style, while a monochronic culture has linear communication style.

These five dimensions of culture have implications on work behaviors: the system of values and beliefs will lead to motivational problems if people interact with others from incompatible cultural backgrounds. Since the influences on behavior are not direct, culture is often overlooked as the main cause of the problems. But the fact that there is a persistent problem of significant rates of premature return among expatriate managers (Baliga and Baker cited in Katz and Seifer, 1996) provides sufficient evidence that the development of a strategy to prevent cross-cultural problems in performance is very much needed. Some ways to cope with these problems are pre-departure training, cross-cultural consulting, on-site socialization and selection. Among those four, selection is the most cost effective and preventive method. Therefore, in the next part of this article we will discuss several propositions for the criteria for successful working behaviors in a particular cultural setting, to be used as a guideline for selection decisions.

Criteria for Successful Working Behaviors in Particular Cultural Setting

Based on Michael (1997) which discusses the matching of management behaviors and the cultural dimension, the following is a list of the necessary skills needed for each cultural dimension. For each cultural background, different values and expectations will be discussed in accordance with the effects on skills needed to perform effectively in a group holding that particular culture. Some skills are effective in several cultures but some are counter-effective in certain cultures. The focus on the following list is on the skills that are required, or conducive to, optimum performance within an organization of a particular cultural background.

1. Individualistic Culture

Individualistic society expects members to be independent and responsible for their own life, and therefore they are expected to fight for their own rights. People respect individual rights and encourage the fulfillment of these rights. In a supervisor-subordinate relationship each has his/her own rights and each interacts in a way which will win appropriate recognition from others. In this kind of cultural background, supervisors are expected to involve their subordinates in decision making and to share their authority. Therefore, delegation and consultation skills are important in order to maximize performance. For example, management by objective programs, which emphasize co-partnership between boss and subordinates, work well in United States, which has a strong individualistic culture (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997).

Skills to cope with conflict situations are also important in individualistic cul-

ture, especially for an open conflict situation, for example in the form of open arguments. Conflict is more likely to occur in individualistic culture since when the individuals in an interaction have conflicting interests, and given everybody is holds tightly on to their individual rights, each party will want to win and perceive the situation as a part of the fight for her/his own rights. On the other hand, in collectivist culture, which places a high value on harmony, conflict situations are less likely to occur.

2. Collectivist Culture

An ability to understand others, or empathy, is essential in a collectivist culture since to maintain harmony a person has to be able to put herself or himself in the position of others. People are expected to show courtesy rather than give directions. A supervisor need not tell or remind subordinates about their duties, since these duties are already understood. Simple expressions like "It's your job!" or "It is your responsibility!" or "You are paid to do that!" might offend subordinates.

What is expected from a supervisor is his/her understanding of a subordinate's rights, because if a subordinate asks outright for consideration of his/her individual rights, this will be considered inappropriate or impolite. To show his or her understanding, a supervisor might support, counsel, and motivate subordinates rather than give orders or directions. Therefore, supporting and counseling skills are important in collectivist culture.

Since a collective culture favors a group 'belongingness' over individual works, particularly to maintain harmony rather than for task performance purposes, a further skill important in a collectivist culture is team building. This does not mean that task is not important, but stress-

ing task performance when team building is not acceptable because the priority is given to being a member of a group. Performance will follow accordingly.

3. High Power Distance Culture

In a high power-distance culture a leader is expected to have more knowledge, ability and wisdom than the followers do. That is why they are perceived as having a higher status in the social hierarchy. If a leader often asks a subordinate's opinion before he/she makes decisions, will be perceived as an incapable leader and lose respect. If a leader loses respect, he/she will also lose the ability to motivate subordinates, resulting in a drop in performance. Therefore, to be an effective leader in a high power-distance culture a leader should keep consultation to a minimum.

On the other hand, being perceived as having more knowledge, ability and wisdom, he/she is expected to counsel and support subordinates. Supporting and counseling skills are essential because they have a significant impact on the motivation of subordinates, since being close to a person with a higher status itself will make them feel proud.

Kipnis and Schmidt (cited in Michael, 1997) describe three kinds of influence tactics. First, hard influence tactics which are characterized by demanding, assertive, and sometimes intimidating and even threatening behaviors. Second, soft influence tactics which are characterized by flattery, good behavior, and drawing on friendships to gain influence. The third are rational tactics, which employs facts, logic and bargaining to explain why certain decisions or behavior should be taken.

Managers in a high power distance culture are expected to be able to use hard influence tactics on their subordinates, so they can maintain the disparity in the boss-

subordinate relationship (Michael, 1997). On the other hand they are also expected to be sensitive and appreciate the soft influence tactics of their subordinates, especially if the manager comes from a low power distance culture. In a low power distance culture soft influence tactics by subordinate will be perceived as "sucking up" and lose its effectiveness.

4. Low Power Distance Culture

Communication skills are essential in a low power distance culture since equality between boss and subordinate requires a lot more two-way communication. That is why participative management programs work better in a low power distance culture. The communication skills required can be in the form of informing, clarifying and monitoring behavior.

Since the relationship between boss and subordinate is equal, the most appropriate influence tactic is the rational one. The ability to present facts, use logic and explain the rational of an opinion or a recommendation is a very important part of being able to perform well in a job.

5. High Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

In a high uncertainty avoidance culture, details are important in every aspect of the job. If details are not attended to, employees may feel uncomfortable. Supervisors are expected to spend more time to explain what is expected from the job (Michael, 1997). Standard procedures, guidelines, and detailed data of work results are some of the job aspects common in a high uncertainty avoidance culture. Thus the ability to deal with, and a preference to work with details is required.

For a manager to be able to perform well, communication skills that enable them to reduce uncertainty on the job is

important. These skills include informing, clarifying and monitoring behavior.

6. Low Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

Since in low uncertainty avoidance culture uncertainties are more acceptable, managers can focus on strategic issues rather than details. Deviation from planned action or change is best performed by those who can tolerate uncertainty. Therefore, strategic planning skills would be most effective in a low uncertainty avoidance culture, in which deliberate strategic planning is more appropriate.

Low uncertainty avoidance is also conducive to innovation championing roles (Shane, 1995), so managers with innovative ideas will perform best in an organization with low uncertainty avoidance cultural background.

7. Masculine Culture

Cultures that are masculine tend to attach great importance to earning, recognition, advancement, and challenge (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997). Sekaran and Snodgrass found that individual recognition and performance are emphasized in masculine culture (cited in Michael, 1997). Given these cultural tendencies, managers are expected to reward, give recognition to, and inspire subordinates. Managers who do not have a favorable attitude toward individual recognition and reward will not fit in a masculine culture.

8. Feminine Culture

Dominant values in a society with feminine culture are personal relationships, group harmony and group performance, judging successful behavior more by the ability to show concern about the welfare of others and less motivated by self-inter-

est (Hofstede; Kanungo and Jaeger cited in Michael, 1997). Therefore supporting and counseling skills are essential for managers. Teambuilding skills are also appreciated, aimed towards consideration of others rather than task oriented.

9. Polychronic Culture

This dimension of culture deals primarily with the preferences of cognitive processes people make: most significantly planning and problem solving behavior. In a polychronic culture, managers are expected to be able to think on a broad and situational base when they make plans or solve problems. As a consequence, planning will take longer (Doctor cited in Michael, 1997). Managers who are the "let's get going" type will not be suited to a polychronic culture, since patience and thorough considerations are needed. Flexibility is also important since the situation may change when the plan is implemented, and when this happens the decisions and actions should also be changed accordingly. Mintzberg (Cited in Michael, 1997) calls this emergent-type planning.

While in a monochronic culture networking is sometimes necessary if there is dependency on the party involved, in a polychronic culture, networking is part of the social interaction that has to be maintained with long-term implications. In line with its circular way of thinking, a polychronic culture would say make as many friends as possible: "Making friends with him is good. I don't have to know why right now but we never know what will happen in the future". This kind of emergent-type thinking is part of the culture. A monochronic culture on the other hand would say: "I need a help so I make friends", or at least "I need a friend so I make friends".

A polychronic culture requires networking skills, important for a long term relationships among business partners and with government officers, thus maintaining an environment which supports the organization. Networking in polychronic culture is a way to prepare an environment of long-term support for the organization when unpredicted problems occur.

10. Monochronic Culture

As mentioned above, a monochronic culture favors a linear way of thinking: a cause-effect relationship. It is also concerned with precision and is time sensitive. Planning is the stage where goals are specified in advance and purposeful activities are performed in a step-by-step process. Therefore managers are expected to be able to compartmentalize activities into a linear format and to have a deliberate and rational attitude toward planning. Mintzberg (cited in Michael, 1997) calls this deliberate-type planning.

Reasoning ability is highly valued in monochronic culture, and every decision made has a sufficient reasoning behind it. People would ask why a certain plan should be implemented or a certain decision has to be followed. Intuitive managers would not effectively influence subordinate behavior as they do to the polychronic culture.

The required skills for each particular cultural background mentioned above are useful as guidelines in a selection program to fill positions in a country away from the company's home base. Combined with technical skills, these required skills should help managers of different cultural backgrounds to perform as expected by the company.

To provide a clearer picture of how these guidelines can be applied in practice, following is an example of selection crite-

ria to be considered in the case of Japan, with its mixed cultural dimensions. The descriptions cover only the culturally bias criteria, and since they not specific to certain position, technical skills requirements are omitted.

Practical Example

Japan

Japan has a combination of collectivism, masculine, moderately high power-distance, high uncertainty-avoidance, and polychronic culture. This mixed cultural background means that American business people have sometimes found Japan difficult to understand, particularly when Japan outperformed United States in terms of economic growth in the 1980s.

Some patterns of behavior in Japanese workplace are fairly typical and worth considering if American business people want to do business there. These patterns of behaviors are related to the five dimensions of cultures described above.

Interpersonal relationships in Japanese company are very important, both between boss-subordinate and among co-workers. Interpersonal conflict has to be avoided and managers should be able to create an environment of trust and harmony. A safe environment with no open conflict among employees will motivate them to perform better.

In order to release tensions from work-life, informal gathering is very important. That is why Japanese workers usually spend more time with their bosses and co-worker after working hours. They usually go to a pub to have a drink with their supervisor and co-workers, where they can discuss work related or other issues. In that informal meeting workers can feel at ease, free from formal and structured relationship of the workplace.

Japan is a "tate-shakai" or vertical society: a society with hierarchical interpersonal relationships (S. Sezaki, 1998). Different languages are used when communicating with persons from different hierarchical status. Respect to those of a higher status is a must. Failing to do so will cause problems in a relationship, and since interaction is important for business, this will in turn impact on business performance.

This hierarchy is contextual, meaning that one person might have low status in one context and high status in other context (S. Sezaki, personal communication, May 3, 1998). For example a new employee who has a low status within the company will be perceived to have a higher status when he goes to other company as a customer. Since this status hierarchy is important, Japanese works are highly motivated by promotion and social recognition.

The strong uncertainty avoidance culture of Japan accounts a great deal for the Japanese "passion" for detail: most Japanese products are compact, small and detailed. And Japanese business reports and management checklists are also commonly very detailed.

Considering this cultural context, the following criteria would apply for selecting employees to be placed in Japan: 1) strong interpersonal skills, especially humility or willingness to put oneself in a lower status position when necessary; 2) networking skills, in order to build and maintain long-term relationships; 3) supporting and counseling skills, and sensitivity to provide social recognition to subordinates; 4) team building skills, 5) flexibility in behavior and decision making and the ability to adjust quickly to different contexts of interpersonal relationships; and 6) ability to work with details and

communicate in a comprehensive and detailed manner.

Strong interpersonal skills can be evaluated through interview or group discussion. Candidates with weak interpersonal skills tend to dominate and are unwilling to listen to others. Even though they may be smart and brilliant, they cannot succeed without the acceptance and assistance of the others.

Networking skills can be assessed from the activities and connections the candidate currently has. Strong networking skills will be apparent from a candidate's wide range of social relationships or activities.

Relevant past experience is a good source of information to assess a candidate's team-building and decision making skills. Finally, some psychological tests can be administered to detect the candidate's ability to deal with details.

Conclusion

Substantial evidence exists indicating that culture differences have a significant influence on performance in multicultural working environments. But to date most research on cultural impacts on behavior in the workplace are descriptive rather than practical in nature. A practical approach to this phenomenon is necessary in future studies on cross-cultural organizational psychology.

Cultural issues in selection is one topic which will attract more attention in the coming decades of a global market characterized by rapid changes and dynamic working activities. This paper has given an initial but brief contribution, and empirical studies of these propositions is recommended, in the hope of benefiting the culturally diverse, global workforce of the future.

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