

Is it all about culture? A study on frustration with respect to the work situation in dispersed, global IT projects at a merged, multinational company

Karin Olsson

Cecilia Pedersén

Jan Wickenberg

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Abstract

This article reports on the difficulties, peculiar to dispersed global projects, which may be a source of frustration to project members. Our study was carried out within a multinational pharmaceutical company, which following a merger reorganized its IT organization into global organisation. Members of the Swedish part of its IT organization reported severe problems after the reorganization, and called for an investigation. The reported problems were global projects struggling with cultural differences and, as a consequence, overconsuming their allotted resources. However, previous research regarding merged organizations has found, that complaints about cultural differences might be a mask for other problems.

Our findings do include cultural differences being an obstacle to project performance. However, we identified project complexity and geographical distance as two additional, important factors explaining frustration and low performance in the global, dispersed projects. Thus, our study supports the earlier theory that practitioners overload the concept cultural differences, ignoring that global projects typically involve more stakeholders, and that it is more challenging to create the trust among the dispersed team members necessary to create a high-performing team.

Global projects can be expected to reach a climate of high-performing team later than a local project, leaving its members to performing less during a longer time. Consequently, and putting other advantages aside, if management fail to develop a successful global team strategy, such projects can be expected to be more costly to the company, and more frustrating to team members being used to quickly reaching a high-performing state. Such a strategy would need to include ways of motivating project members to actively build trustful relations.

Introduction

The past half-century has seen a steady increase in popularity of the project as a way of organising work (Adler, 1999; Eisenhardt & Brown, 1997). The trend towards globalised business and companies growing through mergers and acquisitions, coupled with improving communication technology, in terms of computer networks and videoconferences, thus set the stage for global projects. The term global project, as used in this article, denotes a project involving people from more than one country. At the core of global projects is the ambition to utilise key competencies dispersed throughout the organisation. A multinational company, with a wide range of resources available to it, may therefore be better able to address local needs and prerequisites through the formation of global teams (Barczak & McDonough, 2003). However, it is often both impractical and expensive to relocate team members to a common locality (McDonough & Cedrone, 2000), which introduces the notion of a global but dispersed team. Although reliant on communication technology (Mark, Abrams, & Nassif, 2003), a dispersed global team is still different from a completely virtual team, as members may occasionally meet face-to-face even though the team is predominantly dispersed (Geister, Hertel, & Konradt, 2005).

Research on project management is typically practitioner oriented, with strong links between theory and practice (Engwall, 1995). However, literature on project management often assumes face-to-face meetings and overlooks alternatives, such as dispersed project teams (Kealey, Protheroe, MacDonald, & Vulpe, 2005; Lientz & Rea, 2003; Mark, et al., 2003; Olson & Olson, 2000). Usually, the social and psychological factors, which contribute to the function of the organisation form, are not in focus in research on project management (Christensen & Kreiner, 1997). At the same time, global projects can be expected to differ considerably from local projects in terms of these social and psychological factors, since the opportunities for direct communication, a condition for mutual adjustment (Mintzberg, 1979, 1999), are likely to be limited. Moreover, it has been argued that technological substitutes to face-to-face communication are frequently overrated: what is expected of these technologies usually seems to exceed what is actually possible to accomplish with them (Olson & Olson, 2000). Global projects thus merit further investigation with respect to the sociopsychological qualities.

This study was commissioned by an IT organization within a multinational company, here called Aurora. As a result of Aurora being merged a few years earlier, it has shifted from a local functional organisation to a global process organisation, and the IT organization has reorganise in a similar fashion. The IT unit therefore contains members of staff with previous experience of local IT development projects, but who are now assigned to global IT development projects. This allows a comparison between local and dispersed global projects directly with the respondents.

There are signs that dispersed global projects at Aurora are accompanied by problems. Firstly, project members had complained about cultural differences in their projects. Secondly, dispersed global projects at Aurora have been reported to overconsume their resources. An earlier report demonstrated that project members show "limited enthusiasm for working across cultures" (Meist & Dequidt, 2002 p125). However, it has been suggested that complaints about cultural differences may be a mask for more profound but less tangible problems (Vaara, 1999).

The purpose of this study is to explore the context surrounding dispersed global projects that causes difficulties peculiar to these and prevents teams from achieving expected and desired efficiency and high performance. This investigation will look at a wide array of factors, which may have a bearing on the results. However, this study is only concerned with the project members' experiences and subjective interpretations. Distinctions between project members in terms of hierarchy, gender, age, experience, et cetera, are not made here. Nor is any attempt made to substantiate or refute respondents' statements, or to correlate these to project scope or outcome. This study is also limited to analyse the perceptions of Swedish employees.

In this article, dispersed global projects are explored from a perspective of frustration, as experienced by the project members. This produces an analysis on the individual level rather than on the team level. Frustration may be viewed as a symptom of unresolved, or even unnoticed, problems. It is possible to look at expected success from a reversed motivational perspective; understanding frustration as an obstacle to motivation to work is important; "knowing what 'turns people off' is as important as knowing what 'turns people on'" (Shani, 2009 p10). A study exploring reports of frustration is expected to result in feedback with a negative ring to it. This kind of feedback, interpreted as deviations from expected optimums, is essential for the development of organisations and organisations employing dispersed global projects may benefit from improved project design. In the words of DeMarco: "...frustration is a kind of gold that you can mine to find out more about what makes you tick: you as an individual or, in this case, you as a working group" (1997 p268). Even though frustration can be presumed to have a negative impact on the work performed by the people perceiving it, it may also be a means to detect underlying problems. Therefore, this article aims at answering the question: What causes frustration in dispersed global projects? This is a broad question, which may draw upon several issues not known in advance.

Frame of reference

This study explores the junction between global projects, dispersed organisations, complex development work and multicultural work teams. Vaara (1999) cautions that "rhetoric on cultural differences is already plagued by overly simplistic understanding of these multifaceted phenomena" (p 107). This advocates a broad theoretical approach to provide a set of diverse tools in order to understand the phenomenon.

Project work

Projects represent a popular way of organising work and are embedded in a dense body of literature. Some of the core elements of this are addressed below. Global projects may be thought of as a special type of project, involving additional challenges in terms of scope and impact, project team composition and interaction, complexity as well as cultural differences. However, standard project management tools are rarely designed to meet these particular challenges (Lientz & Rea, 2003). Statistics show that more than half of global projects fail to be completed or fail to deliver the promised results. Lientz and Rea (2003) claim that this may be due to treatment of a global project as a standard project, excessive management attention, failure to stay the course or to take into account self-interest, and over-dependence upon modern communication technology, which is discussed in more detail below. Marmgren and Ragnarsson (2001) suggest that global teams need to distinguish between coordination on a global scale and operative work on a local level, close to the

project members. This enforced hierarchy increases the risk of typical hierarchical problems such as burdensome administration, outdated information and problems of communication. The duplication of information may consume an inordinate amount of the project members' time (see Coordination cost). In contrast, successful projects usually have a simple organisation with a nucleus of members that cooperate well and with a project leader who interacts naturally with the rest of the group and keeps a continuous dialogue with the project members.

Determinants of success and failure in global projects

In their literature review, Kealey, Protheroe, MacDonald and Vulpe (2005) compiled four inhibitors to successful global project work. First is the influence of cultural differences. The second reason why global projects may be so challenging is the effect of geographical distance on the efficacy of organisational processes. However, since literature focuses on global projects where people visit another country, the distance in focus is the one separating the expatriates from their home country. Some of the effects may include communication problems between field workers and headquarters, homesickness among field workers, and difficulties in reaching key personnel. The third reason for global projects to be more difficult is the weakening of the "environmental scanning function" that is "accurately perceiving and understanding what is going on around the organization, and future trends that will affect it" (p4). When working abroad this environmental scanning function is not on the same high level as it normally is at home. The fourth and last reason for global projects to be so difficult is the differences in self-interests and incentives of local and foreign sub-organizations and its members.

Group development

Core to project management is the performance of the project team. The Tuckman Model (Tuckman, 1965) is a synthesis of research on group development. In the extrapolation of general concepts, it identifies four stages – forming, storming, norming and performing - according to two dimensions; group structure and task activity. Groups begin with the forming stage, but do not become efficient problem solvers until the performing stage. Group structure is interpreted as "the interpersonal configuration and interpersonal behaviours of the group at a point in time" (p 385) whereas task activity denotes "the content of interaction as related to the task at hand" (ibid).

In the forming stage, group structure is characterised by testing and dependence. This involves group members testing what behaviours are acceptable. This development is parallel to the identification of group leader and the establishment of dependence and guidance of this person. Task activity in the forming stage is defined orientation to the task. This involves group members attempting to characterise the task by its relevant parameters and how the group knowledge will be used to accomplish the task.

In the storming stage, group structure is characterised by intragroup conflict as members display hostility to one another as a means to express individuality and resist group structure formation. Lack of unity is particularly common. Task activity is defined by emotional response to task demands. The emotional reaction to the task is thought to be a form of resistance to the demands of the task on the individual. This is more visible in groups working with self-understanding as a goal and less so in groups dealing with intellectual tasks.

In the norming stage, group structure is characterised by the development of group cohesion. The group becomes an entity by virtue of its members' acceptance of each others' idiosyncrasies. Harmony is of high priority. Similarly, task activity takes the form of open exchange of relevant interpretations and information is acted upon in order to allow the emergence of alternative interpretations. Again, openness to other group members is characteristic of this stage.

The final, performing, stage sees a group structure of functional role-relatedness. The group can become a problem-solving instrument by directing members as objects. Members can adopt roles that enhance the task activities of the group since subjective, social relationships are already established. Task activity is characterised by the emergence of solutions in the form of constructive attempts at successful task completion. Most importantly, energy, which in earlier stages was invested in the structural dimension, is now available to task activity.

Communication technology

In order to compensate for the lack of face-to-face meetings in dispersed project teams, members usually have access to a range of modern communication channels. These include e-mail, regular phone calls, video and telephone conferencing and web-based conferences.

Sculman (1996) notes that face-to-face interaction is a richer mode than any of the alternative technologies. It allows a more flexible format through the use of simultaneous non-verbal channels and the potential for back and forth exchanges, which can resolve ambiguities. However, he also notes that face-to-face meetings are often costly in terms of coordination and travel. Therefore, when the richness of communication is deemed unnecessary, people will tend to choose a less costly alternative.

Modern communication channels are limited by lacking one or several types of communication cues (van Dijk, 1999). Non-visual channels rob the interchange of cues from facial expressions and body language. Non-audio channels prevent communication through tone of voice and inflection. Asynchronous channels, including many textual channels but also voice mail, prevent the opportunity for immediate back and forth exchanges to dispel ambiguity.

Thus conversations intended to resolve problems or elucidate complications would usually benefit from a face-to-face interaction (van Dijk, 1999). A rich mode allows participants to fill in gaps through the use of other cues to grasp the context, which may differ depending on the social, cultural and personal background of the participant (Lea & Spears, 1992).

According to Wallace (Wallace, 1999 p16) "we all seem cooler, more task-oriented, and more irascible than we might in persona" when we communicate online. Moreover, Wallace (1999) suggests that for "a workgroup to succeed, the individuals who participate must develop some trust in one another" (p84). Furthermore, "face-to-face groups expressed more agreement with one another" (p16) since people come across as warmer and unable to hide. Sculman stresses the importance of understanding the context of an interaction. Context often resides in the group as shared knowledge of the tasks, roles, habits and group norms, or comprises psychological motivational factors such as trust. It is therefore only when contextual elements are certain and unambiguous that electronically mediated exchanges may be preferred over face-to-face exchanges. However, Sculman concludes that "the major consequence of the introduction of new information technologies within

organisations has not been better communication, only faster misunderstanding” (1996, p 367).

Coordination costs

When working in distributed organisations, the coordination effort increases since there is information flow not only within, but also between sites. This flow of information in an organisation is not always beneficial. In fact, to decrease the need of sharing information is the very reason why organisations are divided into subunits (Jay R. Galbraith, 1973). An excessive information load makes the organisation more complex, and a lot of resources may need to be allocated to the coordination of activities. This may result in a sense of sluggishness, as actions are delayed awaiting coordination. This may be referred to as coordination costs¹ (White & Siu-Yun Lui, 2005).

Even so, Mark et al (2003 p99) suggest that “organizations are moving towards a new type of work: group-to-group collaboration across distance”. In light of this, distance between collaborating groups may not be a fully adequate concept for clarifying where the actual teamwork takes place. Instead, Mark et al (2003) define the term ‘space between’ as all the connections, interdependencies, and gaps that exist between team members. Partly because of this ‘space between’ collaborating groups, misunderstandings and errors occur. Distance, for example between subgroups at different sites in a global project, also obscures visibility inside such projects. One important characteristic that helps obtain common ground in an international project is co-presence. Olson and Olson (2000) suggest that this requires face-to-face meetings and cannot be achieved by any modern communication technology, concluding that “distance still matters” (p 139).

In some global projects people are supposed to work together almost without face-to-face meetings. This contributes to a greater information volume and technological complexity, and the effort to coordinate activities increases. Quinn and Dutton (2005) caution that “these demands [coordination efforts] can deplete people’s energy” (p 37). Coordination may therefore not only cause direct but also indirect costs in the form of frustrated project members.

Knowledge and organizational learning

Adler (1999) suggests that an organisation’s competence goes beyond the collection of knowledge, skills, and experience of its members to include the infrastructure of the organisation. The infrastructure refers to factors such as values, culture and structural capital. Hence, organisational learning is related to features like common mental models, culture, values and norms expressed as strategies and policies. The infrastructure is of particular importance for supporting the collection, storage and distribution of new knowledge and experience. It also provides models and frames of reference for interpreting these and exchanging them between members of the organisation. To create an innovative climate, Adler (1999) argues that four factors are of special importance: challenge, trust, freedom and diversity such as different opinions, experiences and clashes between these.

Argyris and Schön (in Anderson, 1994) developed a model which describes features of theories-in-use which either hamper or boost organizational learning. According to this

¹ The terms coordination costs and sharing of information will be used interchangeably. Sharing of information is fundamental to organisational life and coordination costs is the concept assigned to the resources these activities consume.

model, individuals are seen as having a set of governing values which they, through their theories-in-use, strive to keep within an acceptable range. Although there is a large variability in espoused theories, theories-in-use may be grouped into two major categories, known as Model I and Model II. Model I theories-in-use are associated with values which hamper double-loop learning whereas Model II values boost it.

Model I represents predominantly competitive and defensive strategies, and has been suggested to dominate most social systems. Argyris and Schön (in Anderson, 1994) argue that “the Model I world view is a theory of single loop learning” (p 7). Model I is characterised by strategies designed to achieve unilateral control of the environment and task and unilateral protection of self and others. Because exposure of thoughts and feelings leaves the individual vulnerable to the reactions of others, protective actions include minimising communication and defensive behaviour.

Argyris (in Anderson, 1994) claim that most people support Model II theories-in-use, even though evidence would suggest that Model I predominates. It has been assumed that this reflects the western society’s preference for those values. However, it has been suggested that most people acknowledge employing a mix of Model I and Model II theories, and that they would admit to being competitive at least occasionally.

Some notions on culture

Theory on organisational culture has received contributions from several disciplines. Traditional anthropology and contemporary psychology are the primary sources (Vaara, 1999), but psychology, management theory and linguistics also feature. However, the cultural perspective on organisations was not the object of widespread interest until the 1980s (Vaara, 1999), and is so a rather young discipline. The assembled literature in the field of organisational culture does not form a uniform, cohesive body of theory, but rather a multifaceted set of perspectives.

Various researchers have offered more tangible definitions of culture. Dahl (2004) suggests that it is “not only the shared modus operandi of a group of people but also the shared values that underpin the modus operandi” (p 2). Mullins (2002) defines culture as “a distinctive pattern of values and beliefs which are characteristic of a particular society or sub-group within that society”. Deal and Kennedy (1982) simplify it into “the way we do things around here.”

The concept of corporate culture may be seen as having two dimensions, the collective and the individual. On the one hand, it has to deal with the aspects of dynamics within a group, of groups relative to other groups, and the role it plays in corporate management. On the other, corporate culture has to address the latent processes and hidden attributes that mark individuals as belonging to a specific culture. It is in this elaborated view of the components of culture that different approaches begin to distinguish themselves.

Analyses of organisational cultures tend to be heavily influenced by preferences to draw clear-cut boundaries, possibly as a consequence of social identification processes where identity is constructed so that it becomes separate from others. Vaara (1999) suggests that organisational cultures are much more overlapping. Organisational boundaries could therefore be depicted as moveable, fluctuating, permeable, blurred and even dangerous.

Moreover, because national boundaries have proven so difficult to transcend, literature is often felt to suffer from problems of stereotypical conceptions. Stereotypes may be thought

of as generalised beliefs about the characteristics, attributes and behaviours of members of certain groups. Arnold et al (1998) suggest that while stereotypes may have some validity in that members of one group on average differ from members of another, they caution that actual differences may be overestimated. Moreover, once formed, stereotypes are hard to change. Stronger evidence is usually needed to discard a stereotype than to form one.

Stereotypes are thought to derive from a need to establish a clear map of a social world where identity is defined in terms of group memberships. Thus stereotypes can be used to create social maps, but a group may also use them to assert its own relative value. An apparent danger is that people in different groups will perceive each other in terms of negative stereotypes. This may also be used to justify attempts to maintain or enhance their own superiority while minimising collaborative activities. Arnold et al (2010) suggest that this tendency is especially marked when groups are relatively similar, as this is when people most feel the need to stress their distinctiveness. This conforms to Vaara's findings (1999) that exaggerations are common to strengthen borders, and that "much of the construction of cultural differences is about the construction of cultural differences" (p 110).

Method

This study was commissioned by the IT organization at Aurora, a multinational company formed in a merger about a decade ago. R&D at Aurora is located to the UK, the US and Sweden. Being a support function to R&D operations, the IT organization has both resources and staff as well as customers dispersed throughout these R&D facilities, and frequently undertake global projects. IT is divided into eight subgroups and the largest one is responsible for staffing. The mission of this group is "to provide the right people, at the right time at the right price, to deliver the right products and the right services". When a project is launched, project members are chosen from this group. However, they stay in their own offices rather than being co-located with their project team.

Before us conducting our study, Aurora has enforced heavy restrictions on work related travel, primarily for economical reasons. Consequently, most communication between project team members is done using e-mail, telephone, or video conferencing.

Method of data collection

A researcher will not be able to depict the images and associations, which constitute the relations among respondents' symbolic expressions, via mundane empirical analysis (Geertz, 1973). Instead, the researcher must get close and offer his interpretation of the creation of meaning. Thus, the research subject transfers part of the interpretation. A useful method to achieve this may be the running commentary in which the respondent retells critical incidents and concrete events associated with the organisation (Schultz, 1995). In this study, this was accomplished by employing qualitative interviews, in which respondents related events in order to exemplify their answers. Alternative methods, such as questionnaires, were deemed unsuitable for the purpose, since they are predetermined and consequently fail to capture the respondent's personal interpretation. However, the interviews must both provide relevant data as well as undergo transcription for validity, and could not be allowed to be fully in the form of a running commentary. The running commentary was therefore supplemented by interviewing.

A semi-structured interviewing technique was chosen. Such interviews yield comparable data across the subjects, even though it fails to understand how subjects themselves structure the topic at hand (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This means that even if the respondents may explore different paths, the interview is still somewhat structured and that set constraints. The respondents were asked the same main questions, but these were not always put in the same order. The flow of the interview was given higher priority than the particular order of topics, which was subject to change. Follow-up questions were dependent upon the response of each individual and therefore varied. There was also variation in what questions triggered a response among the respondents, who were free to elaborate on the subjects they found interesting. The interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half each, which seemed to be a satisfying length to reach a state of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Most of the interviews took place in the respondent's own office, though sometimes our office was used, in particular if the respondent shared her office with others. All but one interview took place face to face, the exception being a telephone interview with a respondent working in a distant office. These eleven interviews were then transcribed for analysis. During transcription, no names were used and respondents, if necessary, were referred to as "she" or "her", regardless of gender, for reasons of anonymity.

The respondents were randomly chosen among people who fulfilled all of the following criteria:

- Working in the IT organization at Aurora Sweden, either as an employee or as a contracted consultant.
- Experience of working in global projects at any level.
- Well acquainted with routines and working procedures at Aurora.

The study was divided into an pre-study, including five respondents, and a main study including eleven respondents. The pre-study was conducted in order to try out the question guide, but also to develop an understanding for how the respondents reacted to different words and formulations. During the pre-study, the use of particular words and expressions seemed to somewhat block the respondents or lead them onto a predetermined track. It was therefore decided to avoid using for example the expressions "cultural differences" or "frustration" unless the respondent herself brought it up. Occasionally, it was mentioned it at the very end of the interview if the atmosphere of the interview seemed to allow it.

Because only Swedish respondents were interviewed, the reliability the results could perhaps be placed in question. However, in this study, it is not the objectivity but the subjectivity of the respondents that is of interest. People will act according to their interpretations of their experiences, even if these are subjective or skewed. Cultures are not independent constructions but take shape relative to each other, which suggests that a study of the perceptions of only one side of a cultural divide is still relevant. In order to shed light upon and understand the frustration experienced in dispersed global projects, it is therefore not misleading to draw conclusions from one party only. Although the parties may have different perceptions, comparisons between them will be of little interest because they do not provide information on what actions may result from them.

Method of analysis

Responsive evaluation is a method of analysis, which implies “letting the design emerge during the evaluation process (rather than being predetermined)” (Hosking & van der Haar, 2004 p1030). When conducting qualitative interviews it is not always clear what the findings are until the end and that encourages a gradually evolving design of the study.

Ely (1991) stresses the importance of recognising the interpreter as a subjective interpreter when analysing qualitative data. It is important that the interpreter reflects upon the way in which she looks at the collected data and how that influences her analysis of it. However, analysis is about finding patterns, and speculation may aid that activity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Following transcription of interviews, the data was thoroughly studied to search for patterns related to the research question. Particular attention was paid to issues, which appeared to evoke emotional, rather than strictly analytical, responses among the respondents. This was characterised by spontaneous narration without interference or prompting questions. These issues were sorted and organised into an overall pattern that was both cohesive and consistent with the reports made by individual respondents. This produced a tentative framework for understanding people’s perceptions of teamwork in dispersed global projects.

Results and analysis

This study investigates how people perceive their work situation in global projects at Aurora. Through the analysis of data collected it especially tries to answer the question “What causes frustration in dispersed global projects?” The respondents were asked to give their view on potential problems on a number of aspects in dispersed global projects in order to identify obstacles to performance.

The respondents were asked to describe how they experience their work situation in global projects, as opposed to their work situation in local projects. The respondents spoke of insufficient communication and about the difficulty of working with unfamiliar people, and how this compromised the expected team spirit. The concept of teambuilding was notably absent.

A large number of problems and sources of frustration were reported. During our data analysis, three major categories emerged:

- **Complexity:**
In a complex organisation coordination activities are both time and energy consuming. Our data revealed that this is a source of frustration. It seemed to be frustrating to have to spend much time on coordination, partly because it slows down the project and partly because it makes it harder for project members to stay motivated and enthusiastic.
- **Cultural differences:**
Perceived cultural differences lead to difficulties in getting close to the people they work with. This results in, among other things, lack of trust and feelings of insecurity, making it harder to work efficiently.
- **Distance:** Results indicate that it is hard to create personal relations without meeting face-to-face. Project members report that working without personal relations and without seeing each other lead to frustration over lost efficiency.

A few respondents reported having experienced frustration earlier in connection to dispersed global projects, but not any longer. This state, here called *frustration surmounted*, suggests that it is possible to find ways of working in dispersed global projects that reduces frustration and improves the attitude towards this kind of work.

Complexity

Complexity in an organisation is about, among other things, the number of stakeholders and number of different geographical locations. The respondents referred to complexity as a form of sluggishness caused by the project organisation growing large. With more stakeholders aboard the project, coordination cost would rise, and it would take longer to reach results (J. R. Galbraith, 1974). This complication is related to the difficulty of establishing personal relations.

A major contributor to the difficulties, that were felt to surround global projects, was thought to be the purpose and the focus of the projects themselves. A global project is taken to mean a project involving several sites in different countries, which implies a project objective of broad relevance. This will in turn come to be about unifying a number of disparate points of view which all needs to be taken into account; else the project objective may fail its intention. This contrasts sharply with the expressed preference for close-knit project teams. This is how one respondent characterised a global project:

"In order for something to become a global project, [] you know this is going to be big. [] Because otherwise it never reaches that level. And by big, you know this is going to mean a lot of work, it's going to be complex, it's going to be a lot of people involved, it's going to be unwieldy to get all decisions in place. And when they are in place, it's going to be like a tidal wave, it just rushes on. [So it] is size, and maybe complexity. And then I don't mean specifically culturewise."

In order to minimise complexity and to speed up project work the catch phrase 'think globally, act locally' was frequently used among the respondents. This suggested that it was not dispersed global projects as such, but the work situation they implied, that bothered respondents the most.

"I think that most people would probably not turn down the opportunity to work globally. Most people see it as challenging, and it is encouraged by the company. [] So I would say that most people are positive to working globally themselves, but negative towards global solutions."

To think globally but to act locally appears thus to be the expressed ideal among the respondents, and that the global aspect is resolved through some sort of reference group. The preferred way of working entailed a close team – arguably rare in a complex organisation - in touch with the global requirements:

"It is always easier if you have someone close. [I want to] have a core group close. I've had that once or twice. And then you can run it tightly in Swedish with a few people and then communicate it or receive input from the rest."

However, if there is a lack of transparency towards other sites, the outcome is unlikely to suit those sites. Therefore, such a solution would require other sites to relinquish projects and trust that one site will strive for a globally optimal solution. The above respondent's suggestion would thus drive the challenge out of the project but not stop it from influencing the end result.

Not wanting complexity in a complex organisation is a paradox. Delegating tasks to local divisions is a means to reduce complexity (Jay R. Galbraith, 1973). However, when global teams are formed and they bring together experts from around the organisation it follows that complexity will increase. There does not seem to be an easy way of reducing complexity.

An overall feature respondents seemed to associate with global projects was the amount of time they tended to consume. According to one respondent, the process of creating unity among a large number of team members is particularly time-consuming:

"I would say that this [conflict] became unnecessarily complicated. [] There were twelve organisations, from six sites, in three countries. And complications had more to do with the number twelve than the three countries. [] If you had had six people representing these three countries, I think it would have been resolved, but now there were twelve different points of view."

This statement describes a typical coordination problem. Among the respondents, especially the project leaders seemed to find coordination activities tiresome. It seemed as if coordination was felt to be a boring problem, an obstacle that had to be overcome in order to be able to do what you do best: lead projects towards high performance. This time and energy consuming coordination was not perceived to be an interesting or challenging task, but a tiring impediment. Coordination is thus a cost, not only in time, but also in energy.

Cultural differences

During interviews, the respondents described what cultural differences they thought existed, between for example Britain and Sweden. Cultural differences, as the respondents perceive them, seem to widen the 'space between' in the same way physical distance does. Yet, it is interesting to note that when interviews turned to the subject of particular work conditions in dispersed global projects, 'culture' or 'cultural differences', were not terms that respondents tended to bring up. On the other hand, when the interviews regarded challenges in general the term cultural differences was used rather frequently. Also, when asked about their British and American counterparts, respondents readily came up with a number of traits, which they argued were typical of these nationalities. This contrast suggests that respondents attribute culture to people, but not to work.

Interestingly, respondents reported that once you have a personal relationship with a foreigner, you tend not to think about her origin. The cultural differences then do not have a negative impact after a close relation is formed. Cultural differences seem to fade away as team members get to know each other, and the team reaches the performing state in the Tuckman model (1965).

Language as a cultural difference

Language is often accorded a special place in theory on culture. "Language determines thought and if there is no way to express a particular concept in a language, then that concept just cannot be used" (Burr, 1995 p34). Thus, mastery of language is not merely helpful in expressing an opinion or understanding an objection, but a prerequisite for it.

There are several layers to mastering a language. There is the fundamental issue of vocabulary and the problem of simply not understanding all that is being said, but there are also social and professional difficulties in how to use the language in order to achieve the desired result, even though this may be nothing more than informal social talk. Because English is the corporate language at Aurora, Swedes are in a position where they need to

manage both aspects in a foreign language. The respondents felt that language in particular, as a vehicle for communication, could be a potential extra barrier as well as a source of discomfort in international situations. These findings support Burr's elaborations on language as a tool for identity construction and as a vehicle for a mutual interpretation of reality. Some respondents felt that not mastering the language as a native put them at a disadvantage in both aspects:

"It's harder for us to conduct a discussion in a foreign language, [] we're automatically at a disadvantage."

It was not unusual that respondents felt that the vocabulary skills were generally quite adequate, but that problems might appear in less defined contexts, such as more free-flowing discussions. It seemed that trying to put together arguments in the heat of discussion caused particular problems:

"I think most people are fine as far as language goes, but you're kind of at a disadvantage when it comes to more discussions. Not everyone is willing to step into a bigger arena then."

The real challenge was thus felt to present itself in routine situations and in social contexts. Greeting phrases, different protocols when writing e-mails and choice of words were generally associated with some degree of uncertainty. In particular, respondents would identify different national customs in communication style, which might cause friction if they are not remembered.

Moreover, it was suggested that following and participating in a discussion in a foreign language is more of an effort, and cannot be done with the same relaxed ease that would have been possible if it was conducted in Swedish.

"I would say that you have to make more of an effort, you have to make an effort just to be part of the discussion."

Respondents made a special reference to the speed of the dialogue when talking with native speakers, which was thought to be rather prone to accelerate, making it near impossible to comprehend what was being said. It was also suggested that this was perhaps not always made clear, adding another reason to stay quiet.

"It's probably about inferiority, about not admitting that you don't understand."

While language might be an underlying reason as to why Swedes were felt not to throw their weight about more, respondents also suggested that Swedes are not accustomed to market themselves and their professional qualities in the manner that Americans and to some extents Britons are felt to be. It was also mentioned that a social pressure not to elevate oneself is typical of Swedish culture (also described by Daun, 1998) and that this might explain a reluctance to adopt such behaviour:

"We have this jantelag in Sweden, 'don't let people think they're special' kind of."²

However, it was felt that even when people accept and deal with such reluctance, lack of language still hampered the technical idea exchange as well as the social dimension of communication:

² Jantelagen: a Swedish concept which denotes a social pressure of modesty and not to stand out. According to this, bragging or boasting is very much looked down upon (Daun, 1998).

“My English is not brilliant, but I’m over that, I talk anyway. But I don’t master the fine distinctions. And I think that many Swedes feel hampered by that. And then you come across as very no nonsense and down to business. And that could probably be seen as a bit brusque.”

It was generally perceived that simply speaking one’s mind, without regard to correctness, was the better way to go. However, this was acknowledged to require both self-confidence and a bit of courage:

“It’s better to say something than to sit and think about the proper wording and accurate grammar, it’s better to say what you think. Then if it doesn’t stand up to grammars check ... Not everyone [does this] but I’ve seen it at some meetings. And it’s easy to fall in that trap yourself, thinking about what you’re going to say, word for word.”

In the end, however, respondents seemed to think that the most significant import of this was perhaps not so much occasional grammar slips or failure to find the right words, but the implications of these to the social context and the personal relations. This was specifically linked to the importance of personal relations in project work and how these affect the quality of communication:

“Because I think that that’s what’s behind all these empty phrases, it’s the insecurity. [] It’s a kind of pride, you’re afraid of losing face. But if you’re not afraid of losing face, [] it becomes so much more interesting. And when you’re part of discussions like those, when it becomes more open and people drop their guard – which is much easier when you’re in the same room – then you’ll find that Swedes aren’t that quiet at all.”

Defensiveness in response to the threat to lose face was felt to have direct implications to the level of trust in international projects:

“I think it [the inferiority] fuels stereotypes, [and] it makes it more difficult for us to solve conflicts. I think it makes it more difficult to show trust. [] That was at the core of this conflict in the project I was involved in before, that people found it hard to show faith in suggestions from the [English] sites. ‘If we leave this to the Britons, they’re just going to make it really complicated and troublesome. So it’s probably for the best that we’re part of this as well.’”

The issue of language permeates most international projects, and while most people are believed to master it well enough for it not to be a major obstacle, it still represents an extra step to climb. The necessity of a corporate language is not in question, but the disadvantage was felt to be one-sided since Swedes constitute the non-native speakers in most international projects.

Concluding, language difficulties lead to feelings of inferiority and insecurity among the Swedish part of global projects. Trust does not seem to come as easily when one part feels inferior to another. This is also a source of frustration and it disables high performance project teamwork.

Importance of cultural differences

While most respondents would perceive cultural differences primarily between Britons and Swedes, but also between Swedes and Americans, some respondents suggested that these should not be overstated. Respondents would draw on experience of working with Finns, East Europeans and even Indians to illustrate how minor these were. It also seemed that many respondents hedged their thoughts on cultural differences and associated

complications. Although it could be argued that this stemmed from a sense of political correctness or an unwillingness to commit oneself, these explanations did not seem to quite reflect the context. A more satisfying explanation would be that the respondents were uncertain about the actual extent of the problem and were unwilling to draw a gloomier picture than they felt was called for.

Furthermore, it was suggested that differences in work processes were more a result of a merger between two different companies, rather than specifically resulting from people of different nationalities working together. Although some distinct organisational differences could be identified as potential sources of difficulties, respondents were hesitant to attribute these to cultural differences. However, a conflict between two sites is often complicated if there is a national boundary in between. The respondents were overall reluctant to talk about national cultural differences but preferred site or individual differences.

It appears that tools to deal with cultural conflicts, should they occur, are lacking, and there is no official discussion about them. This is not to say that problems are ignored, but nor are they addressed as cultural conflicts. A conflict that is not satisfactorily resolved is conveniently explained by an argument about cultural difference. As discussed above, there are plenty of examples of global projects becoming seemingly unnecessarily complicated. Cultural differences on this level are an expression with negative connotations, because your own culture tends to occupy a premier position.

This may lead to a paradox: while cultural differences are not a problem as such, the fact that it is not up for discussion may make it one.

"The fact that there are three countries that need to cooperate is not a major problem as such [] But the fact that this is not discussed, that fact that people don't say that this may cause problems [] because this means that it will be discussed during the coffee breaks instead. [] I think there is some kind of glitch there. [] You talk about cultural differences on a companywide level, but you don't talk about it on a project level. However, project members may use it as a model of explanation."

The respondents did not attach great significance to cultural differences as a cause of problems. However, it seemed that if discounted, even small cultural differences might trigger resentment or frustration. This phenomenon thus deserves greater awareness.

Distance

There are two types of distances dealt with in this study. The first one is geographical distance, which is the most obvious one. This is a physical distance and has nothing to do with crossing national borders, it could, for example, be two Swedes working together at different sites. The second distance is about not knowing the person you work with and this represents a mental (or psychological) distance. When there is mental distance between project members, a lack of trust often occurs and people are afraid of dropping their guards. As the mental distance is similar to cultural differences it will be reported as such (see Cultural differences). Thus, this chapter will focus on geographical distance.

The frequency of face-to-face meetings in global projects has decreased, following company travel restrictions. Many respondents admit that travel used to take place excessively and sometimes unnecessarily, people would take a flight to Great Britain for an hour-long meeting. However, respondents also felt that relations within the global projects suffered from a lack of face-to-face communication. It was frequently stressed that a personal

relation to colleagues is important, which helps to replace a collective view of “them” by an individual one. This was felt to be severely compromised by the reduced possibilities of face-to-face meetings.

“Those who are going to work with processes [] are very important to my input. If I don’t have a personal relationship with them, they’re going to ignore me. They need to know that ‘oups, now [I’m] going to be upset’ and they need to know that it is me ... I don’t want them to see me as a piece of paper. That you are a ‘piece of paper’. They need to know that I am a real physical being.”

The main consequence of travel restrictions was felt to be the diminished face-to-face communication and how this may tilt project work towards a more impersonal communication climate. Respondents also report an over-belief by management that communication tools can replace face-to-face communication. Management thereby seems to regard the communication problem as solved, but project members are still frustrated about dispersed global project work. We also recognized during our work at Aurora that more often line managers’ message boards read ‘away on business journey’ than did project managers’ message boards. We consider this only a marginal observation. However, in an organization where line managers to a larger extent can enjoy face-to-face meetings, perhaps they to a lesser extent recognize the problems of working without such opportunities.

Frustration surmounted

Some respondents did not report experiencing frustration related to distance, cultural differences or complexity in dispersed global projects. According to those respondents, when deeper personal relations are established and informal paths have opened, problems associated to cultural differences disappear. The problems caused by distance and complexity also become smaller.

Geographical distance is mostly about having to use modern communication channels, rather than face-to-face interactions. This becomes much easier if a personal relation is already established. Then you do not have to worry about your colleague not understanding your jokes for example. Personal relations seem to take care of language difficulties and problems due to complexity in a similar way, as you do not need to fear losing face.

Personal relations are formed through everyday contact, informal communication and trust between the persons involved. This may be the key to reaching results faster:

“A lot of people have networks with others sitting in a different [country]. I have daily contact with two or three people in England. But together we consider ourselves a team, [] working together and not having all these ... problems due to formality. To make things happen, you avoid the complicated bureaucracy. [] [There are] lots of small networks that get things done.”

“I myself have had very good contact with a guy from England and we’ve had long talks about language ... language differences and things like that... It’s been a lot of fun. [] I usually ask him about strange expressions ... and he occasionally asks me about Swedish expressions. Which he’s heard! ‘What does this really mean?’ And I have to explain it. And then I translate our exotic Midsummer songs and things like that into English. So he understands what weird things we sing!”

Being able to make sense of someone's behaviour works as a kind of social insurance that the environment as you see it functions as it should (see also Weick, 1996). As one interviewee put it:

"If you get to know people it's a different thing, but ... But it's hard to predict how people you don't know are going to react..."

This is about trusting your project partners enough to be able to communicate in an open and free-flowing manner. Also, respondents seem to feel that it is related to how well a team really performs:

"On the other hand, I try to maintain my [] networks. Maybe I call sometime and talk to people. Whom I haven't talked to in a while. Maybe I'm wondering about some little thing and then you call and just talk for a while. And maintain your network. Because after all, that is what makes ... this person you have met, and whom you've come to trust at some point, [] you have to maintain it. And when you need this extra [favour], you get it. Because you know this person. And then you can get something done really fast instead of waiting for two weeks."

These quotes are examples of how personal relations may be a great help to overcome frustration with dispersed global project. If you write an e-mail to someone you know very well, the possibility of grammar slips does not occur to you. On the other hand, writing to someone you have never even met, demands a greater effort in being correct and in supplying the right tone to avoid misunderstandings.

Summarising results

The results sketch the outline of an emergent model, composed by complexity, cultural differences and distance. Our data analysis has shown these factors to be important for teambuilding, as they may hinder teams from reaching the desired performing stage and therefore cause frustration. This model draws upon Tuckman's ideas on teambuilding, which moves from forming the team to a performing team (1965). Although aspects of this emergent and tentative model have received treatment in literature, they have not been compiled into a framework or found in any extant model.

It is interesting to note that certain project members have found ways of overcoming the problems involved in dispersed global projects at Aurora. This discovery merits further investigation. Yet, what seems to apply to these people is that they have been able to recreate the desirable qualities of cooperation that many dispersed global projects seem to lack. These qualities are above all trust and personal relations between project members. Trust and project team spirit appears to be pathways to high performance, which is recognised in Aurora's Project Management Framework. Those ambitions are hindered by feelings of inferiority, differences in behaviour, time-consuming complexity, and distance. Moreover, because these obstacles can be overcome, it is a source of frustration when they are not.

Discussion

Complaints about cultural differences in dispersed global projects were a starting point for this study. Surprisingly, respondents were reluctant to point to cultural differences as a major problem during the interviews. However, they did come up with a rather stereotype list of cultural differences in global projects. It was suggested that because cultural

differences were not addressed on a project level, people were left to vent their feelings on the matter in more informal contexts, such as coffee breaks. This suggests that although the concept “cultural differences” is not used in a formal setting, it still prevails informally.

Prejudice and stereotypes

Prejudice and stereotypes exist among the respondents, although mostly in a playful context. Arnold et al (2010) argues that stereotypes may induce different groups to view each other negatively and that this is most pronounced when people feel they need to stress their distinctiveness. Informal talk among people who form a stable group, such as people taking coffee breaks together, could therefore be a potential starting point for exaggerations. This corresponds to the statement that coffee room talk can be on the negative side in a context-bound fashion and might not be representative for the professional arguments made by the same individuals. Another point worth considering is that in-group conversations may differ substantially from between-group dialogues, to the point where one line of argument is used within the group and another one between groups.

“So they’ve grown a bit more humble on the American side. An adaptation on their part ... which actually goes a bit against their culture ... that they’re the best and the brightest, kind of []. And try to adapt. But then at the same time many [Swedes] now say that [] ‘Yeah, but we’ll try to run this project as far as possible without involving the Americans. Because we know what they’ll do.’ Then you create this [situation where] the Americans try to reach out, only to be rapped over the fingers. And then they’ll do their thing in the end anyway.”

It seems that it would have been possible to avoid problems of this nature if the change of behaviour had been more explicitly announced. Yet this was not done, and the change went unnoticed and unappreciated until it was rescinded. This suggests that a lack of trust coupled with inadequate information and preconceived notions of the other part may be an intricate problem to solve. If indeed cultural differences carry negative connotations, difficulties associated with global projects risk fuelling those stereotypes, which according to Arnold et al (2010) are easier formed than abandoned.

A theoretical oversight

Available literature seemed to indicate that international projects might be particularly vulnerable to complexity, cultural differences and distance. However, there does not seem to be any theory, which unites all these disparate influences into one coherent model (see Determinants of success and failure in international projects). The emergent model used here has no distinct predecessor in theory, possibly because theory does not use frustration as a starting point. We maintain that frustration is a relevant research focus, either in the role of identifier of actual obstacles or as identifier of objectives for a change in attitude. However, this approach is conditioned upon the assumption that frustration is not constructive. Obviously, if it were, the approach would eliminate something positive.

The absence of suitable theoretical structures may be due to the lack of attention literature on project management has paid to this particular type of global projects. For instance, in the model on international projects proposed by Kealey et al (2005), working in a dispersed team is neglected. No attention is paid to what Mark et al (2003) call the ‘space between’ which is a primary source of misunderstandings. This means that the issue of modern communication technologies, and the consequences of using such, is not addressed. This seems to be the case in most project literature. Presumably, this reflects the concept of an international project as one where project members work alongside one another in the

same immediate environment. However, if people working close together, in a figurative sense, literally sit far apart, the question of coordination costs becomes fundamental and should not be ignored.

Surmounting frustration

Not all respondents concurred with the suggestion that dispersed global projects caused them frustration. Even though this was not specifically examined, respondents did no longer seem to regard these issues as problems. The question that remains is if the problems are permanently solved or merely temporarily overcome. Complexity, cultural differences and distance are still there, but are they manageable? Tuckman (1965) suggests that if conditions for a performing team change, they need to reiterate the process that takes them from forming a team to being a performing team. However, even if this suggests a more temporary optimal stage for the team, personal relations still survive a project. Respondents reported that maintaining their personal networks put them in a better position at the start of a new project. Therefore, it is possible that even if the process needs to be reiterated from time to time, learning and experience may help to facilitate these iterations. This suggests that people with deepened and more developed networks may find this process easier to undergo and would thus be less prone to experience frustration.

The gap between project and management

The prevalence of these problems may reflect the power of traditional project models, which tend to underestimate softer aspects of project teamwork. It may be that management has fallen into the trap of an overly mechanistic perspective, and has been led to believe that instrumentally mediated communication is enough. Presumably, since the concept of geographically dispersed project teams is a relatively new phenomenon, little has been written on the subject. In the words of Marmgren and Ragnarsson (2001 p81), "management today is mainly focused on what is possible to steer and control, and far less on what is uncontrollable, but maybe possible to support. This focus on the controllable and predictable suggests that the dominant point of view still is a mechanistic one." It could thus be assumed that management tend to employ a rational, mechanistic view on organisations and project work as opposed to a softer psychological perspective (Morgan, 1998).

The mechanistic view does not take into account the theory that co-presence cannot be emulated through modern communication technology and bypasses issues of trust, which have been found to be central to team effectiveness. Means to create, at least initial, temporary co-presence include travels. However, whereas management may find travels with tangible purposes easier to justify and grant, project members seem to find those with more indistinct purposes, such as getting to know fellow project members, far more beneficial. It could therefore be argued that a strict rational view on a global organisation reduces its ability to function effectively. The gap in communication between project team and management therefore seems to be an issue of being able to express what is felt to be important. Co-presence was presented as a solution to distance related problems by some respondents, even though the exact mechanism of the solution remained unknown. It does seem that focus, as well as interest, was centred on the solution to the psychological problems rather than their content. This disinterest may explain why these problems go unrecognised. Project leaders seem to have difficulties of transforming these feelings into rational arguments, which carry weight with management. However, it is a key step in bridging the gap between project and management and this merits further investigation.

The problem with dispersed global projects could be said to be one of working together without seeing each other. This problem is common knowledge, yet not acknowledged. It would seem that management has a poor understanding of the extent of the consequences, and because the problem is not anticipated, it tends to be overlooked and unrecognised.

Conclusion and implications

Using frustration as the key to analysing the obstacles to achieving group efficiency - the performing state in Tuckman's model – reveals a double set of connections between the two. On the one hand, frustration stands in opposition to and hampers task motivation, which is generally linked to successful endeavours. On the other hand, frustration may be a symptom of problems standing in the way of efficiency. This study has suggested that frustration in dispersed global projects may be a consequence primarily of complexity, cultural differences and distance. These factors affect interpersonal relations, usually referred to as the softer side of project management. This side is frequently either disregarded or summarily attended to, both in literature on and execution of project management. A number of suggestions and implications present themselves, but the level of abstraction implies varying degree of hands-on usefulness.

- Goal oriented project leaders are often eager to attend to the task in focus. However, according to Tuckman's model, attempts at task completion are not in evidence until the performing stage, before which typically three other stages have been passed. Most importantly, the group structure needs maturity before energies can be pooled into task solving activities. Teambuilding needs time, and dispersed teambuilding may require even more.
- Dispersed global projects rely heavily on modern communication technologies, waiving the richer face-to-face mode of communication. However, the psychological side of electronically mediated communication seems to be less well understood and unappreciated. This represents considerable opportunities for learning and improvement among team members as well as management.
- Open informal communication, which characterises Model II, is seen as the foundation for informed decisions towards successful task completion. Model I, on the other hand, is representative of groups where members are left to look out for themselves. Consequently, individual group members will tend to employ strategies designed to protect themselves and make decisions through which no blame can be directed back at them. This situation has the potential of becoming a vicious circle, where discussion of shortcomings is likely to trigger even more defensive behaviour. Discussion is unlikely to break the circle, but displays of trust may; however, this requires courage, since the favour may not be returned, at least for some time.
- A special aspect of communication is language, which for many participants is a foreign one. Vocabulary, in particular in terms of nuances and idioms, may not sit as comfortably as they might like, and people may feel it more of an obstacle to present themselves professionally at their best. Halting a discussion and admitting to not understanding fully, may thus constitute somewhat of an embarrassment. Once again, it may be argued that the courage to speak up is at the heart of efficient and successful project teams.

Managers responsible for organizing globally, dispersed teams would need to recognize that such organizations are prone to reach a state of high performance later than would co-located teams. These managers would also need to understand the influence of cultural differences, as well as the challenges of satisfying more divergent sets of stake-holders, that typically would be involved in such projects. A company strategy aiming at executing work by means of globally, dispersed project teams would need to be supplemented by a staffing and communications strategy compensating for the challenges created by such a way of organizing.

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