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Cultural Flexibility in IT Projects – A New Approach on Managing Diversity

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Abstract

Project managers face various challenges in international IT projects due to distributed and intercultural teams. Besides geographic distance and different time zones, cultural issues and other diversity aspects impact the success of IT projects, and should therefore be methodically included in IT project management standards. This paper critically reviews existing diversity management concepts and approaches on managing culture in IT projects. It will be suggested how to improve these current concepts, how to manage diversity aspects in IT projects on an individual basis more flexibly and effectively, and which perspectives further research should include.

Keywords: Culture, Diversity, Explication of implicit Information, Information Technology, IT Projects, Managing Diversity, Project Management, Teams

Introduction

Due to a high internationalization in the IT field and consequently international IT projects, project manager face one challenge that has given considerable few emphasis in research: intercultural teamwork and diversity management on a project level. Project managers that work with international and distributed teams in the IT sector face various challenges like geographic distances, different time zones, and specific regulations or laws. Though technical and methodical skills are extremely important for managing IT projects on an international scale, diversity aspects should be of high interest as well. Although the impact of cultural aspect on the success of projects is acknowledged in literature, the international project management standards lack a comprehensive, methodical approach in the field. This paper will provide a critical overview of diversity management concepts and strategies, and suggestions for managing diversity and cultural aspects in IT project teams more individually, flexibly and effectively.

Diversity and Diversity Management Approaches

The term “diversity” can be generally described as visible and subjective differences between people (Wagner & Sepehri, 1999). Visibly noticeable differences in international teams can, for example, refer to race or symbols. Subjective differences are – for instance – different values, attitudes or experiences. More specifically, diversity can be seen as the “mixture of people with

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different group identities within the same social systems” (Fleury, 1999). According to Aretz and Hansen (2003), diversity can be described as “dissimilarity, variety, and individuality that emerges from various differences between people” (p.9). Further, diverse teams are a “collection of individuals whose unique characteristics provide a variety of perspectives aimed at the problem or task that the team is undertaking” (Egan, 2005, p. 212). As teams could be seen as social systems, in this article diversity will, in the following, be referred to “explicit and implicit differences between individuals in teams”.

Explicit and implicit aspects can be viewed on various levels and clustered from different perspectives. Aretz and Hansen (2003, p. 15) summarized various levels of diversity based on previous research: Diversity can, for instance, be divided in a primary and secondary dimension. While the primary dimension includes aspects like age, gender, ethnicity, race and physical abilities, the secondary dimension also takes educational backgrounds, income, marital status, religious beliefs and work experience into account (Loden *et al.*, 1991). Another approach clusters diversity aspects in *individual* factors like personality, *group-relevant* factors like cultural differences, and relevant *organizational* aspects like the structural and informal integration (Cox, 1993). A third attempt examines diversity from the following point of views: a *demographic*, a *psychological* and an *organizational* perspective. In this approach, the demographic view describes gender, age and ethnicity, while the psychological view examines values, beliefs and knowledge. Aspects like occupation, status or the hierarchical level within an organization are summarized in the organizational perspective (Jackson & Ruderman, 1996).

If we assume that the differentiation by Loden (*et al.*, 1991) clusters diversity aspect in visible and invisible aspects, we can further refer to an *implicit* and an *explicit* perspective of diversity. In that regard it seems necessary to specify the term “implicitly” as, in literature, the term is often used synonymously for tacit or personal knowledge. Tacit knowledge – very simplified – can be defined as the “opposite of codified knowledge” (Busch, 2008, p.2). “Codified knowledge” is described as explicit knowledge or information. In other words, tacit describes “knowledge that usually is not openly expressed or taught” or knowledge that people gain by observing and learning from experience without being explicitly stated (Busch, 2008, p.3). Horvath (1999) uses the term “personal knowledge” which is “grounded in experience” and “cannot be expressed in its fullness” (p. ix). The inability to fully express personal knowledge can be explained by the unconscious nature of that information. In literature the definitions of “implicit” information vary and often collide with the definitions of tacit and personal information. Therefore, implicitly may be seen as a combination of tacit and personal knowledge – as aspects of knowledge that are not codified, also due to its unconscious elements. Summarizing, implicit aspects in IT project management could be “knowledge or information that is not explicitly expressed and/or unconscious”.

In regard of international projects, not all differences are as obvious like gender or race: implicit aspects like ideologies or specific work experiences only come to surface in an open communication environment (Aretz & Hansen, 2003, p. 25). Shore and Venkatachalam (1995) state the core problem in managing implicit diversity aspects in IT projects: “Culture’s influence may be indirect, difficult to isolate, and difficult to measure” (p. 5).

Success Factor “Diversity”

Even though the term diversity seems quite unclear and open for various interpretations, several studies agreed on the important influence of diversity issues on IT projects and/or IT systems implementations, as well as on its impact on the success and effectiveness of IT projects (Harris & Davison, 2002; Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1991; Markus & Soh, 2003; Narayanaswamy & Henry, 2005; Shore & Venkatachalam, 1995). “Diversity of individual abilities, experiences,

competencies, and qualifications of human resources builds a success factor in organizations, which enables entrepreneurial strategies of increasing flexibility and continuous learning” (Aretz & Hansen, 2003, p.9). Diversity should not only be seen as a separating, but more as a connecting element, and as the potential to use synergies (Aretz & Hansen, 2003, p. 12). Ignoring differences within teams and organizations may inhibit the implementation of information systems in a global setting and increase the risk of a project failure (Harris & Davison, 2002, p. 234).

Regarding creativity in teams, Egan (2005) proofed in a study that diversity is an important success factor in leading creative teams. The study – performed with high-performing leaders – showed that homogenous teams are less likely to develop as creative ideas as heterogeneous teams. This may derive from the different perspectives and knowledge needed for the effectiveness and creativity of a team. Further, it was shown that the team’s creativity can be best supported by providing the opportunity for direct connections and relationships between the team members, but also by explicitly broach the issue of diversity within the team. “By developing a deeper appreciation of the interactions between individuals motivated towards creative team processes and creative outcomes, we can better understand teaming, the role of diversity in teamwork, and creativity in general” (p. 208). Emerging conflicts due to different perspectives can – if effectively managed – result in new and innovative ideas (Egan, 2005, p. 217 & 219).

“With globalization becoming a prominent trend in IT industry, it is increasingly important to understand how to tackle cross-cultural issues. Doing so will not only help lead to more effective project management practices but also to a world of increased cross-cultural understanding” (Narayanaswamy & Henry, 2005, p. 144).

Besides the important impact of diversity, this also shows the direct relation of IT project management and culture. Therefore, when referring to diversity in an international context it seems necessary to explicitly take a closer look at the concept of “culture” and theories on intercultural management.

“Culture” as Impact Factor in International (Project-) Management

According to Hansen (2003), “culture” can be defined as knowledge, beliefs, arts, ethics, laws and customs shared by people of a specific society (p. 37). Such values and beliefs are communicated and shared by using symbols and giving symbols a specific meaning. To be able to transmit these values from generation to generation, societies use different methods, e.g. books or art (Hansen, 2003, p. 47), but also language and signs. As Kroeber, Kluckhohn and Clyde (1952) stated that “cultures consists of pattern, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (...) ideas and especially their attached values” (Hansen, 2003, p. 93).

In an internationalized IT branch, different cultures have to work together – often on a project base – and the team members’ diverse values and habits may cause problems and conflicts. Therefore, it is necessary to include cultural diversity and different values in business practices to avoid misunderstandings and disputes caused by colliding cultural backgrounds. One suggested attempt to achieve such an inclusion might be to increase the understanding and acceptance between different cultures. In order to accept and respect other cultures, it is vital to identify differences in value and behavior, and furthermore find ways to consider identified differences in international business practices.

Various approaches have been published trying to explain the causes of cultural diversity and attempts of measurement, but Geert Hofstede's approach seems to be the state-of-the-art, as most authors refer to this approach in their work. Hofstede stated that "one of the reasons why so many solutions do not work or cannot be implemented is that differences in thinking among the partners have been ignored" (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 4). He describes culture as a "mental program" or "software of the mind" which is influenced by experiences in early childhood, education and other experiences in our personal lives within a specific community (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 4-5). Besides human nature – which is universal for all human kinds – culture is an important part influencing our practices. These practices are based on cultural values of a community, manifested in specific rituals, heroes and symbols (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 6 & 8). Another manifestation of this "software of our minds" can be elaborated in national rules and laws, country-specific organizational structures as well as language and religious views (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 22).

In his surveys, Hofstede researched on the dimensions of national culture and examined five main dimensions:

- The power distance index (PDI) measuring the inequality within a society.
- Individualism (IDV) measuring the degree of individualism in society.
- Masculinity (MAS) measuring the distinction of gender roles in society.
- Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) measuring the extent of threat by an unknown situation.
- Long-term orientation (LTO).

Another, frequently quoted, approach on dealing with cultural in projects was established by the Dutch consultant Trompenaars. His studies are based on surveys in 30 different international companies with participants – mainly – from a managerial level (Trompenaars, 2010, p. 1). Trompenaars describes culture as the "way in which a group of people solves problems and

Table 1: Categories and Dimensions of Cultural Diversity in Business (Trompenaars, 2010, pp. 8-10).

Categories	Sub-Dimensions	Description
Relationships with people	Universalism versus particularism	Universalism describes that the way of working is defined by societal codes. Particularistic cultures, on the other hand, give greater attentions on obligations of relationships rather than a strict appliance of societal codes.
	Individualism versus communitarianism	This dimension equals Hofstede's individualism (IDV) index and measures the degree in which people focus on their individual achievements or, in contrast, on the community.
	Neutral versus emotional	This dimension describes if expressing emotion in business is tolerated or even encouraged, or if business is done objective and unemotional.
	Specific versus diffuse	Here, it is measured how important personal contact and relationship in business are. Before dealing with work content, business in diffuse cultures needs to be built upon a personal, informal level.
	Achievement versus ascription	This dimension deals with two extremes: Achievement describes the importance within a society of past achievements, while ascription measures a person's status by attributes like gender, age, status or the educational institution a person graduated from.
Attitudes towards time		This category describes if people rather focus on achievements in the past or on planned development in the future. In comparison, Hofstede's dimension of long-term orientation (LTO) primarily measures if planning is done in a short-term or a long-term.
Attitudes towards environment		This category describes the relation people have with their environment. It shows people's tendencies to find motivation within themselves or through outer circumstances.

reconciles dilemmas”. Similar to Hofstede’s concept, he uses the “onion theory” to describe the various layers culture – visible and invisible aspects. While Hofstede refers to rituals, heroes and symbols in the outer and visible layer, Trompenaars specifies more explicit characteristics like language, food, architecture, religion, fashion and art. Behind these visible symbols lies the implicit part of culture which is harder to grasp: cultural norms and values. Trompenaars (2010) states that cultural diversity and “their effects may not be directly measurable by objective criteria”, but do have a significant impact on an international company’s success (p. 6). Mainly, his approach focuses on the problem-solving tendency of people due to their background, and on finding different solutions in business situations. In this respect, Trompenaars (2010) formulated the following categories and dimensions:

Comparing the dimensions by Hofstede and Trompenaars, it can be stated that Hofstede’s dimensions have a stronger focus on structural aspect, while Trompenaars tries to explain how the relationships and actions influences international business situations.

Criticism about the Concept of “National Culture”

Though the importance of understanding differences regarding culture and other diversity aspects is included in Hofstede’s approach and the research offers significant new findings in the relation between culture and management, the concept of national cultures seems too simplistic (Markus & Soh, 2003, p. 15). Besides the fact that ethnic cultures are not necessarily linked to national boundaries (Harris & Davison, 2002, p. 235), several researchers showed bias in Hofstede’s research (e.g. Huo & Randall, 1991; Markus & Soh, 2003). The criticism includes, for instance, the strong focus on IBM-related organizations and the demographic concentration concerning occupation and gender of the respondents. Hofstede’s dimensions cover many cultural components – however, some are not considered. For instance, religious views are often neglected in cultural management approaches, although this component is a vital part of the concept of culture influencing values and behavior of a society. Moreover, this aspect could be relevant in the planning phase of an IT project due to different religious-based public holidays and rituals.

Another aspect of criticism lies in the focus on “national cultures” in the results. This focus may lead to stereotypes of countries as this concept does not consider different ethnical groups or religious beliefs within the boarder of one country. Further, in a more and more globalized world, reducing people to their citizenship might not be adequate. A passport or birth certificate might not fully describe the cultural background of a person. For example: a team member was born in Japan, grew up in Switzerland and studied several years in the United States. Which cultural pattern by Hofstede would apply to this person? Further, if we take a closer look at the country categories in Hofstede’s survey, we will recognize that the survey splits, for instance, Belgium into the French and Dutch part. On the other hand, the survey only differentiates a main part of the African continent in West, East and South Africa. Here, even national boundaries are not considered, as well as various regions and ethnic groups within the region. In the results, several African countries were merged to one – for instance West African – region. This, for sure, does not show the cultural differences and orientations in its full range.

Concerning Trompenaars’ results, it can be stated that the dimensions are also measuring culture on a country level and applying the concept of “national cultures” comparable to Hofstede. Still, Trompenaars also stated that besides national cultures, also organizational differences and various functional responsibilities within one company, influence international projects. In light of these critics, it seems to be necessary to overthink the acknowledged concept of national cultures in the international context and focus on an effective approach to evaluate differences and similarities on a team level individually for every project.

Approaches of Diversity Management

Nowadays, finding an appropriate diversity management concept seems one of the most difficult challenges in modern organizations (Harrison *et al.*, 2002, p. 1029). Diversity management can be described as a strategic approach, and as an attitude towards understanding diversity in organizations and teams that aims at using diversity as a strategic resource for solving complex problems (Aretz & Hansen, 2003, pp. 9-10). More detailed, managing diversity includes the “planning and implementing” of “organizational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of diversity are maximized while its potential disadvantages are minimized” (Cox, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, the concept’s goal is to maximize “the ability of all employees to contribute to organizational goals and to achieve their full potential unhindered by group identities such as gender, race, nationality, age, and departmental affiliation” (Cox, 1993, p. 11). In that sense, diversity management should be a holistic strategy towards organizational learning which not only raises the acceptance towards diversity, but also the valuing and appreciation of new perspectives and approaches (Aretz & Hansen, 2003, p. 17).

Such strategic management concept can be explained by various distinctions. One approach differentiates between a “surface-level” (Harrison *et al.*, 1993) and a “deep-level”. Diversity characteristics on a surface-level are highly visible, easy to control and to measure. Such characteristics are demographic aspects like age, race or physical abilities. In contrast, deep-level characteristics like values or attitudes on an individual level are only expressed through behavior and the resulting patterns in communication or information exchange (Harrison *et al.*, 2002, pp. 1030-1031).

A more detailed cluster was created by Aretz and Hansen (2003). They described various diversity dimensions resulting in management measures based on four systems. The *social system* includes the aspects ethnicity and gender and results in measures for trust-building and equality. The *organizational system* provides measures on an age- and ability-based level. The *cultural system* includes aspects like ideologies and persuasions that are reflected in the vision, mission and values within a corporate culture. This system can be managed by a clearly defined diversity concept and concrete actions. Such actions include promoting a critical dialogue culture, building mental bridges to overcome stereotypes, and creating an understanding for the connection between diversity and complexity. The fourth system – the *psychological system* – is characterized by aspects like education, personality as well as the work style and mindset of people. These characteristics are directly linked to the leadership within the organization. In that sense, the leadership is responsible for an appropriate diversity process, for the clarification of requirements within this process and for taking necessary actions towards the implementation and controlling of the process.

Aretz and Hansen (2003, pp. 32-33) stated – although not empirically confirmed – that a successful diversity management concept could lead to higher creativity, better problem solving and more system flexibility. Heterogeneous teams may generate more creative and innovative solutions and generate higher employee satisfaction through an improved collaboration. On the other hand, decision-making processes seem to be more time-intensive, and inefficient diversity management may lead to manifestation of stereotypes, communication issues, and resulting lower efficiency and effectiveness.

Inclusion of Diversity Management in Project Management Methodologies

According to previous concepts and studies, implementing diversity management concepts and strategies within organizations and teams should be more supported and more intensively used as management tool. Unfortunately, international project management standards do not provide

adequate methods for the project practice. The current literature on project management recognizes the importance of culture in international projects, but provides few actions for project managers. These actions mainly focus on building so-called “project cultures”. Gareis (2006, p. 155) elaborates that temporary organizations like projects have their own specific norms, rules and values due to their unique, project-specific culture. Such a project culture can be fostered by building up the project identity and by giving activity-oriented tasks and orders. This should be especially done during the project start phase and within the project controlling process throughout the project. Gareis’ measures primarily addresses explicit aspects and do not view diversity in its full extend. Other researchers (Litke 2007, p. 26; Patzak & Rattay, 2009, p. 375) also acknowledge the impact of values, mindsets and norms on the project members’ behavior and on their identification with the projects’ goals, but do not provide an appropriate tool for implementation. Similar, diversity studies in teams regarding conflict potential or communication (e.g. Pelled *et al.*, 1999; O’Reilly *et al.*, 1989; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998) have primarily focused on demographic and explicit diversity aspects. But members of a project team do not only differ in gender, age or ethnicity, but also in their profession and assignment to different departments or functions within their organization (Aretz & Hansen, 2003; Cummings, 2004).

In order to set actions of organizational diversity management concept on a project team level, it seems important to provide easy methods and tools. Some researchers give partial solutions by introducing various actions. Grimheden, van der Loos, Chen, Cannon and Leifer (2006) researched on establishing cohesion and trust – especially within distributed team in an international context – through a culture coach who is included in the team and intervenes if difficulties arise (p. 15). A cultural coach should understand the influences of different cultures or organizational impacts and facilitate the team on an individual as well as on a project level. It is suggested to set up an early face-to-face meeting to support the building of trust within the team (Grimheden *et al.*, 2006, p. 17). This approach might be a good starting point, but does not fully cover the demands on a diversity management method in IT project management. Further, in recent IT practice it is often suggested to handle issues in an international context with technological support. Often, it is neglected that tools can not solve issues resulting from distribution and diversity, and that technology itself will “not make collaboration a success” (Grimheden *et al.*, 2006, p. 17).

In practice, highly diverse environments have to explicitly take different culture-related values and resulting various business practices and work styles into account (Tractinsky & Jarvenpaa, 1995, p. 512). Project managers should facilitate the interaction between the team members and “foster a culture that supports knowledge sharing” (Cummings, 2004, p. 363). Trainings in that regard should put emphasis on teamwork and managing diversity within teams (Jackson *et al.*, 2003, p. 822).

Approaching Diversity in IT Teams Individually and Flexibly

Summarizing, implicit aspects of diversity are currently not a central research focus for standardizations in IT project management. Hofstede and Trompenaars built a foundation for such research, but their approaches seem improvable in two aspects. First, the developed dimensions do not cover aspects like previous experience in IT projects, or usually used development approaches and work styles. Second, a tendency of behavior provided by Hofstede’s studies might be a good starting point, but individuals should not be reduced to a tendency of behavior due to their citizenship. Rather, individual experience and the individual attitude towards their culture have to be considered in project team work. Therefore, it should be questioned how implicit diversity aspects can be explicated in IT project management and methodically and technologically supported during the project management process. A concrete method should

not only include the explication of diversity aspects on a team level, but also a collaborative sharing of team members' differences and similarities. Such a sharing should be supported by concrete actions throughout the project. As every project team can be viewed as a unique, social system, methodologies should provide the opportunity to flexibly and individually manage project teams, and refrain from using concepts of national cultures in order to prevent generalizations and the creation of stereotypes with a team.

Finally, the research on intercultural IT project management should not only focus on cultural differences, but also on individual experiences of the team members. This includes, for instance, personal work experience in previous projects that might be relevant in the current team work. This relevancy will be illustrated with an practical example: Person A works in a traditionally organized, hierarchically organization and is used projects using a waterfall-based methodology, while Person B is a programmer in a small enterprise where IT development is primarily based on the agile methodology SCRUM. If these two people shall cooperate in a collaborative project, besides their cultural backgrounds, also their approaches towards software development and their understanding of procedures and process would be relevant. Such aspects of diversity are – so far – not considered in research current approaches.

Conclusion and Outlook

International IT project management and the success of such projects are obviously linked to explicit and implicit diversity aspects. Each team member in an IT project team has implicit knowledge – mostly unconsciously – about his/her own behaviour, attitudes and values, and work style – which is partly influenced by cultural experiences. If individuals with different experiences – and consequently also implicit knowledge about the resulting behaviour – work together on a project, the derivations may lead to conflicts. These conflicts might bring the different expectations and thinking patterns to surface. To avoid and/or reduce chances for such conflicts, an early explication of implicit diversity factor might be benifitful. From an economical point of view, the reduction of conflicts would lead to lower costs or time as the energy of the employees can be focused on the task rather than on solving conflicts.

Still, the current research on diversity in organizational systems has primarily focused on demographic and explicit impacts and considerably less on implicit aspect in which the team members in IT projects may differ from each other (Avery, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to put further effort in the research of implicit diversity aspects and find ways to explication relevant, project-related differences. Also, a clearly structured and – more important – flexibly usable strategy has to be developed and embedded in existing approaches and processes in IT project management. A new approach should focus on individual and on the team level, and should provide concrete measures for IT project managers. Diversity management theories on an organizational level provide an appropriate basis, but concrete measures and methods should be found in order to allow an easy implementation in practice. Similar to corporate organizational cultures, diversity measures and processes on a team level could moderate the effect of differences and similarities in teams (Jackson *et al.*, 2003, p. 809). Finally, it should be aimed on improving projects' success through increasing the flexibility and effectiveness of team work in international IT projects which might be achieved by reducing conflict potential throughout the project management process.

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