

Avoiding Culture Shock

BY MALCOLM WHEATLEY





Global project assignments, while intimidating, can afford the best opportunities for career growth and creative solutions. The trick is to move into any type of assignment with your eyes wide open so you don't trip along the way.

Take Shayne Phillips, an Australian project manager living in The Netherlands, who has worked in Europe, the United States and Asia Pacific. Global assignments don't faze him: A systems rollout for the Dutch State Mines—a business with offices in no fewer than 41 countries—saw him manage a worldwide team made up of more than 20 nationalities.

But Phillips' advice to other would-be global go-getters may surprise. When working overseas, he says, "Get to grips with the culture. It's your number one priority. It's absolutely vital that you and your team have a firm understanding of the cultures that you'll be dealing with."

And the reason for this insistence? "If you don't do it, your project is at risk—period," says Phillips. "Diversity of culture is one of the main stumbling blocks to success." And right from the start, too, he stresses—such as when greeting people for the first time. "In Japan, people hand over a business card with both hands and bow politely. In Australia, people just say, 'G'day, mate, how are you doing?' These things matter."

Some projects fail due to cultural issues. Before packing your bags for a worldwide assignment, learn to roll with the cultural "idiosyncrasies" so you don't become the **odd one out.**

Fact is, project failures abound in the world of global system implementation. Even technically proficient project managers can lack what it takes to direct multinational, multicultural efforts.

A Different World

Although business practices vary widely from country to country, basic project management principles are the same around the world. Even so, subtle differences in terminology and priorities can escalate into widescale communication failures. "Quite simple decisions can have far-reaching consequences, and it's very easy for these to be mishandled," says Simon Bragg, European research director at ARC Advisory Group, Cambridge, U.K.

But there are more opportunities than disadvantages: Team members from different cultures and countries actually can be a powerful resource. "There's an opportunity for cross-fertilization," says Guido Haesen, a Luxembourg-based project officer within the Innovation Directorate (OG Enterprise) of the European Union. "You find that you're developing different

A few good friends or business associates that are able to tell it like it is and can provide guidance when you go astray are invaluable—especially when you find yourself embroiled in a cultural twilight zone.

PAUL GIAMMALVO,
PROJECT MANAGER, JAKARTA, INDONESIA



PHOTO BY SUHENORA

and unexpected solutions to problems, because they are being looked at from a different perspective.” A native Belgian, Haesen has worked in Germany, Austria, The Netherlands and Luxembourg.

And language is not the issue it is often made out to be. English, whether of American, British, Canadian, New Zealand or Australian flavor, is used widely around the business world, especially in information technology (IT). Instead, says Haesen, “the problem isn’t grasping the language, it’s understanding what the other person wants to say.” It’s a subtly different point—one that trips up many first-time project managers on multinational project teams.

“What people say can be one thing, but what they actually mean, and more importantly, actually do, can be quite another,” says Ian Odgers, a London, U.K.-based director of global headhunting at consultancy Odgers Ray & Berndston. “Empathy toward different cultures is essential if managers are going to disentangle these mixed messages.”

Theory in Action

Denise Barrett, president of PMI’s Technology Triangle Chapter, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, got a cultural briefing before going

overseas. “It gave me the chance to learn from others’ mistakes, rather than from my own,” she says. “Compared to when I first worked abroad, I’m now far more inclined to spend a significant amount of time understanding the project team’s culture, its working style and how it communicates.”

Barrett, who has worked on foreign assignments in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States, heads straight for the vital areas that she knows can trip her up if she’s not careful. “What are the big faux pas that you can make? What are the things you absolutely never do? When a project slips, what options are open to you? Depending on where you are, these things can be very different,” she says.

Vacations pose one example. “In Europe, [residents take] a lot of holidays, which can wreak havoc with a project plan,” says Barrett. “In North America, rightly or wrongly, you can ask people to move their vacation, or phone in from vacation to take status calls or scheduled telephone conferences. In France? Don’t even ask.”

Work ethic and deadline adherence is another related variable. In Germany, says Barrett, “people will do whatever it takes.

They have a very rigorous work ethic and will try to keep their promises at all cost.” By asking “what if” questions, project managers can start to understand how much control they have over the project’s levers.

Small World

India has seen a huge boom in IT project outsourcing in recent years. “The European work ethic is well-defined [in India]: Evening cut-offs and weekends are sacred,” says Vinnie Mirchandani, CEO of IQ4hire Inc., a Chicago, Ill.-based outsourcing consultancy. “The Indian model is closer to the European model than the U.S. model in terms of its intensity. Indians tend to avoid confrontation and so aren’t as aggressive in terms of their project management when things start to go bad.”

What can a project manager actually do to remain faithful to the mission—as well as sensitive to a culture? “Find someone who has the knack or ability to ‘bridge’ different cultures,” says Paul Giammalvo, a Jakarta, Indonesia-based project manager who has worked in Vietnam, Israel and Indonesia and currently services all of Southeast Asia.

“A few good friends or business associates that are able to tell it like it is and can

VIRTUAL TEAMS



DAVID OLIVER,
RESEARCH FELLOW,
IMAGINATION
LAB FOUNDATION,
LAUSANNE,
SWITZERLAND

Even if you enter global projects with your eyes open, you still may be tripped up by time zones. High-tech electronic solutions such as video-conferencing and “virtual meetings” abound, but there’s no escaping the fact that the world is round and that the sun only shines on half of it at once.

Instead, go for the “warm and fuzzy,” says David Oliver, a research fellow at the Imagination Lab Foundation, Lausanne, Switzerland. He’s spent two years studying a live virtual multicultural team within Denmark’s Lego Inc.’s sprawling global operations. His research explores how the team

responds to unexpected things that threaten to derail the project.

His top tips for facing adversity? Increase face-to-face communication, even at the expense of travel. “It’s much more effective than e-mail or telephone,” says Oliver. Next, reinforce the team’s shared identity: Who is it? And what is it trying to achieve? Last, re-establish how the team should respond if other unexpected events occur.

“Don’t assume that the default course of action—which is to carry on regardless with the plan—is necessarily the right thing to do,” says Oliver.

Reader Service Number 043

Reader Service Number 163

provide guidance when you go astray are invaluable—especially when you find yourself embroiled in a cultural twilight zone,” says Giammalvo. “If you can’t do this yourself, then you absolutely need to ensure that you include someone in your team who is good at it.” **PM**

Malcolm Wheatley is a U.K.-based freelance writer and former Big Five management consultant. For many years a contributing editor to *Human Resources* and *HR World*, he also writes regularly for *CIO* and *Manufacturing Systems and Healthcare Informatics*.

FACT OR FICTION?

In today’s business world, companies often are described by their culture. When it comes to multinational working and real cultural differences, such characterizations are too one-dimensional.

Based on investigative work within a real multinational company, Belgian academic Fons Trompenaars showed how flimsy some of these suppositions were in his book, *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1993). Although by now almost 10 years old, the study still stands as a landmark piece of research in the field, largely because of its sheer scale. By working deep inside multinational giant IBM, Trompenaars found that in “particularist” cultures, such as France, Spain and southern Europe, relationships matter more than rules. Northern European countries are more “universalist” and believe that rules take precedence over people.

Most usefully, Trompenaars attached numbers to the labels by calibrating the responses of 15,000 employees in 50 countries to determine the extent to which different cultures are either universalist or particularist. Put in a situation that calls for a particularist or universalist response, 91 percent of Germans and 90 percent of Britons respond as universalists, while just 58 percent of Greeks and 68 percent of French respondents did so.

In other words, if you’re working in Germany or Britain, expect people to grumble about the changes you propose, but broadly fall in line. In relationship-driven cultures such as Spain, France and most of southern Europe, expect open rebellion: Old loyalties count for more.

This material has been reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner. Unauthorized reproduction of this material is strictly prohibited. For permission to reproduce this material, please contact PMI.