Reducing the Online Cross-Cultural Communication Divide between Individualists and Collectivists

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ABSTRACT

In an era of globalized information, Internet usage has profound implications for human resource management (HRM). Cultural diversity and technology literature imply that cross-cultural online communication emphasises cultural fault-lines, while simultaneously, building bridges of understanding between members of different cultures. The key tenet of this paper is that diversity oriented HRM (namely the combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practices) is expected to reduce the cultural fault-lines between individualists and collectivists cultures, positively moderating the cross-cultural online communication effects. Although it is acknowledged that distinguishing values of I/C can increasingly be found within any given culture, the key tenet of the paper is to examine the effect of Hofstede's definition of I/C within the context of cross-cultural online communication.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Individualism, Collectivism, Cultural Diversity, Technology
INTRODUCTION

In today’s knowledge based global economy, online communication is increasingly valued by organisations as a way to efficiently respond to dynamic competitive markets. Internet usage shows no signs of slowing down. Statistics show that approximately 1.1 billion e-mails are sent out daily in the United States (US) and 88 million employees are connected to the Internet (HR Focus, 2003). From 1993 to 1996 alone, the number of Internet hosts grew from 1.3 million to 9.5 million (Gray, 1996). Furthermore, estimates of the Asia-Pacific region’s contribution to global business-to-business e-commerce in 2004-2005 range from $US616 billion to $US1500 billion (Bajaj, 2001). As time passes it is likely that Internet usage will continue to expand amongst members of each subsequent generation worldwide (Negroponte, 1995).

As a backdrop to the increase in online activity, today operate on a supranational level, trading across national barriers and in different parts of the globe. As network competence has shown a strong positive influence on the inter-intra organisational online collaborations, and on a firm’s product and process innovation success (Ritter & Germünden, 2003), the effectiveness of cross-cultural online communication is critical to business success today.

In the past decade technology has affected the way people communicate to accomplish work, which has in turn brought impetus for changes in culture and society (DeFillippi, 2002). Although online communication has fostered an information and knowledge based culture, it has the potential to destroy individual and/or group performance if poorly planned, developed and implemented by the organisation (Martinsons & Chong, 1999). Such people related cultural issues have profound implications for HRM (Bussler & Davis, 2002; Miller, 2003; Moffett, McAdam, & Parkinson, 2003).

Research on both cultural diversity and the Internet shows extreme polarity of views on the relationship between them. Some assert that the new technology reduces cultural diversity in what has been termed the “MacWorld” effect where developing countries aspire to a Western consumer lifestyle (Barber, 1992). Others say it reinforces cultural fault-lines and the propensity for in-group
out-group formation (cf. Donovan, 2003). In an online communication context where Westerners’ independent values and Easterners’ interdependent values are evoked and exchanged (Hofstede, 2001), online communication is predicted to elicit perceived value dissimilarity, reducing work effectiveness online.

Recent research findings imply that the value differences between Westerners and Easterners manifest in different perspectives, attributes and communication patterns that tend to produce significantly poorer perceived performance, more coordination costs, lower satisfaction and lower commitment to cross-cultural communication (Ishida, 1986; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Nadler, Keeshan-Nadler, & Broome, 1985). Diversity oriented HRM, namely, the combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practices is thus proposed to positively moderate the effect of cross-cultural online communication between Westerners and Easterners. These ideas will be explored further in the remainder of this paper.

**INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM ONLINE**

Within a global context, the most important dimension of cultural differences is the relative emphasis on individualism versus collectivism (Triandis, 1990). The concept of individualism and collectivism (I/C) was first identified by Hofstede (1980), and has been studied widely in cultural and cross-cultural research (Hofstede, 2001; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1990). Hofstede's individualism-collectivism definition is about cognitive differences between nations, within which individuals, through socialisation, develop a shared pattern of beliefs, values and ideas (Hofstede, 1994). The paper uses the acronym "ICs" for the term "individualists and collectivists".

There is a worldwide need to proactively manage online information exchange embued with the value dissimilarity of ICs. However, it is important to note that s should give priority to accommodating collectivists’ values online as they tend to evoke more resistance to online communication or fail to communicate accurately online. The combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practices is, however, expected to positively moderate the effect of cross-cultural
online communication on key outcomes. Based on the preceding arguments, we offer three propositions:

**Proposition 1:** Online communication between individualists and collectivists will have both negative and positive effects on use of online communication, attitude to different cultural orientations, emotional response to online cross-cultural communication, productivity, and diversity management quality.

Individualism and collectivism are found to be indicative of large work value differences (Hofstede, 1980). Values are defined as a higher-order concept thought to provide a structure for organising attitudes (Hogg & Vaughan, 1998). Value dissimilarity, therefore, refers to the underlying social psychological differences in cultures, such as conceptualisation of favourable attitudes, social values, core work activities and work purposes (Jehn et al., 1999; Milliken & Martins, 1996).

Individualism refers to societies in which an 'I' consciousness is emphasised through independent values such as right above duties, primary concern for personal goals and immediate family (Hofstede, 2001). The independent values subsequently manifest loosely connected behavioural patterns between individuals and groups. Collectivism, on the other hand, refers to societies in which a "WE" consciousness is emphasised through interdependent values such as cohesive in-groups, mutual obligations and concern for one's groups with unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). Interdependent values manifest closely connected behavioural patterns between individuals and groups (Bochner, 1994; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Hsu, 1981; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norrasokkunkit, 1997; Triandis, 1994, 1995).

Although it is acknowledged that distinguishing values of I/C can increasingly be found within any given culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clark, 1985), the key tenet of the paper is to examine the effect of Hofstede's definition of I/C within the context of cross-cultural online communication. Cultural value is the chosen focal point of the paper because differences with respect to cultural values dominate an
individual's experience within the online environment. This paper uses the term individualists to refer to people representing independent Westerners, and collectivists to refer to people representing interdependent Easterners (cf. Hofstede, 2001, p. 216).

In addition to extreme decentralisation and interactivity, the Internet could genuinely be described as something no previous technology could lay claim to: being global in nature. Previous communication technologies could not overcome the barriers of distance and time the way the Internet can. What then are the consequences of global information flow and usage on cultural values? If changes in technology affect society through changing the way people communicate, how does that change in communication display itself through cultural values? To date, there are two distinctive schools of thought, which state that: 1) technological progress causes cultural homogeneity (Hillis-Miller, 2001); and 2) technology progress reinforces cultural fault-lines (Hall, 1996; Zahir, Dobing, & Hunter, 2002).

According to convergence theory, advances in technology that bring the world closer together diminish cultural diversity. Online interaction reduces the likelihood of people forming stereotypes and the like that tends to occur with face-to-face interactions. Subsequently, this reduces the likelihood that they will perceive dissimilarities and make in-group out-group distinctions and increase the likelihood that they perceive similarities between themselves and their colleagues, initially at least. Value similarity within s is expected to produce less ambiguity, less conflict, more coordination, more satisfaction and more commitment. This is so because value similarity among members facilitates clear communication about what effective, behavioural and cognitive responses are expected of individuals (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Kluckhohn, 1951). For example, Meglino, Ravin and Adkins (1989) found that value similarity between subordinates and their supervisors was positively related to employee satisfaction and commitment.
Contrary to cultural convergence theory, cultural diversity might be maintained and even reinforce cultural fault-lines by way of new technology. A **fault-line** refers to a hypothetical dividing line that identifies subgroups within a workforce based on similarities in one or more attributes (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). For example, Internet portals in different countries, while uniform in design, may have culture-specific content (Zahir et al., 2002), producing unconscious or conscious cultural fault-lines in an online world. A new technology can thus be adopted in different ways. Instead of leading to cultural homogeneity, there is the real chance that each new medium, like the Internet, is adopted by different cultural groups within a culturally specific context (Zahir et al., 2002). Within the cross-cultural online communication context, IC’s dissimilar values could evoke cultural fault-lines thereby negatively influencing its effectiveness. To this end, research suggests that value dissimilarity of ICs exhibited online is expected to have a significant negative impact on cross-cultural online communication in the short-term as well as in the long-term (cf. Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998). Consequently, we predict that cultural differences migrate to the online world, underlying the importance of knowledge about intercultural communication and best HRM practice that minimizes fault-line effects.

*Proposition 2: Online communication between individualists and collectivists will have a greater negative effect on collectivists than on individualists on the criteria identified in Proposition 1.*

Cross-cultural differences make themselves known through the adoption of the Internet. Within collectivist cultures, such as those in East or Southeast Asia, there was more resistance to the use of the Internet. For example, China took a strong stand against the Internet fearing that unregulated access by its citizens to non-official news sites would jeopardize the country’s stability (Abbott, 2001) by letting citizens have access to Western values and Malaysia unsuccessfully tried to filter the content of Internet service providers (Abbott, 2001). The resistance toward the Internet by collectivists’ insinuates their in-group or social group orientation, which can hinder their on-line communication with individualists.
In the business communication literature, there has been a significant amount of interest in cross-cultural communication and high-low context cultures (Guffey, 2003; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2001; Mohan, McGregor, Saunders, & Archee, 1996), which signifies the importance of the study of cultural perspectives toward online communication. Low context cultures, e.g. Germany and North America, tend to refer to individualist group members (Singelis & Brown, 1995), who value direct confrontation and clarity (Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman, 2003; Guffey, 2003; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2001; Mohan et al., 1996). High context cultures e.g. Japan, Greece, tend to refer to collectivist group members (Singelis & Brown, 1995), who value indirectness, politeness, ambiguity and group membership (Bovée et al., 2003; Guffey, 2003; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2001; Mohan et al., 1996). Examples of the affect of cultural perspective on online communication abound. For example, recent research findings show that Chinese websites have a higher frequency of high context orientation whereas US websites show higher low-context orientation (Singh, Zhao, & Hu, 2003). Research findings indicate that collectivists tend to avoid directness in writing (Bearmer, 1994). Chinese speakers have been found to use spatial, correlational logic and litotes writing style whereas English speakers use linear, cause and effect logic and writing styles (Bearmer, 1994).

Individualists’ low context nature and collectivists’ high context nature is expected to permeate into online communication contexts. Collectivists are predicted to show more resistance to online communication which tends to require only the written form of direct, short, and succinct messages, whereas individualists are predicted to show favourable attitudes toward online communication. Collectivists are, thus, predicted to produce more stress and tension in online communication than their individualist counterparts. Consequently, they may demonstrate deviance behaviour from online communication and prefer to communicate matters in person.
In order to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, messages should be tailored to mirror cultural contexts and differences between the sender and the audience. Hence, communication between people from low context cultures (i.e., individualists) and persons from high context cultures (i.e., collectivists) must consider both form of communication and the perception of the wording or language used (George 2003). Thus, we contend that the combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practices would facilitate the most effective message, format and channels of communication that both cultures can understand in an objective manner, while simultaneously, capitalizing on culturally diverse knowledge and talents.

Proposition 3: Combined individualist and collectivist HRM practices will positively moderate the relationship between online communication between individualists and collectivists and the key criteria identified in Proposition 1.

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose a third school of thought, which has not been largely explored within the context of HRM. Namely, we suggest that HRM and technology can be used synergistically to create understanding between members of different cultures while capitalizing on diverse knowledge, innovation and talent. The Internet’s defining features – its decentralized nature, interactivity, and global reach – make it the ideal technology to build bridges between culturally diverse members of organisations and between organisations stemming from different cultures. When faced with the challenge of understanding cultural differences, the Internet can help to alter mindsets (Ramsoomair, 1997) through its global reach and accessibility. Because of the breadth of material that is available online (and the speed with which it can be retrieved or transferred), it is possible not only to come across different types of information, but also to realize different ways of interpreting that information, and to experience the benefits of mixed cultural input and output on the Internet.
In comparison to a decade ago, value dissimilarity online is predicted to produce greater knowledge, innovation and quality decision making processes to deal with the complex global world. Although several studies predict negative outcomes of value diversity, there is some research that shows that members who are dissimilar in values and beliefs can develop more creative and better alternatives in problem solving, and higher quality decisions than similar members (Cox, Lobel, & Mclead, 1991; Ely & Thomas, 1996; Ling, 1990; Mclead & Lobel, 1992).

We, however, argue that the Internet’s potential depends on its users’ perception toward dissimilar cultural orientation online. Paradoxical effects of culturally diverse work found in several research studies reveals the costs involved with ineffective HRM in relation to culturally diverse work processes (Fujimoto, Härtel, & Panipucci, 2004; Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez, 1993; Jehn et al., 1999; Ishida, 1986; Nadler, Keeshan-Nadler, & Broome, 1985; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993; Thomas, 1999). In light of the preceding discussion, we propose that diversity oriented HRM, namely, combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practices, will maximise the culturally diverse adoption of the Internet.

**HRM IMPLICATION ON TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT**

Technology has revolutionized HRM in organisations (Bussler & Davis, 2002; Miller, 2003). Technology and HRM can provide organisations with a highway for growing human capital. For example, recent research across 208 organisations found that HRM and technology investment enhanced human capital development (Youndt, Subramaniam, & Snell, 2004). Technology, however, could destroy individual and/or group performance if it is poorly planned, developed, and implemented by the organisation (Martinsons & Chong, 1999).

While the HR-Technology literature mainly discusses the technology implications of HRM practices (e.g. HRIS, e-recruitment), there is little attention given to the HRM implications of technology management (Hendrickson, 2003; Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003; Miller, 2003;
As technology impinges upon organisational culture, affecting people’s work style (DeFillippi, 2002), HRM plays a crucial role in the management of technology.

Research findings repetitively indicate that poor SHRM can hinder technology management (Bikson & Gutek, 1984; Chong, 1993; Ives & Olsen, 1984; Raheb, 1993; Willcokes & Mason, 1988 cited in Martinsons & Chong, 1999, p. 126). The common causes of technology failures are documented as HR issues, namely, organisational culture, performance management, change management and conflict resolution process (See Martinsons & Chong, 1999, p. 126). Despite such findings, in practice, the role of SHRM as part of the technology management process (i.e. planning, development and implementation) has been given little attention to date. Within the online cross cultural communication context, we contend that diversity oriented HRM will help reduce misunderstanding and conflict between ICs thereby maximizing the potential of their diverse knowledge.

**DIVERSITY ORIENTED HRM**

In the culturally diverse context, top management needs to comprehend the interdependent role of culturally diverse end-users (i.e. individualists and collectivists) and online input/output (cf. Martinsons & Chong, 1999). Diversity oriented HRM can recommend an appropriate sequence of sound culturally sensitive behavioural principles. According to contingency theory, the magnitude of IT benefits will be influenced by organisational design factors (cf. Martinsons & Chong, 1999). In other words, the integration of diversity oriented HRM with organisational IT cultures largely determines the effectiveness of online cross-cultural communication at work (cf. Schnitt, 1993 cited in Martinsons & Chong, 1999, p. 132).

As the scope of this paper focuses on individualism and collectivism, we propose that diversity oriented HRM, specifically the combined use of individualism and collectivism, will positively moderate the on-line intercultural communication effect. Individualist HRM practices, such
as clearly defined task responsibilities and equity in reward allocation, and rewards for individualism rather than group performance (Deutsch, 1968) promote concern for one's welfare over that of the group (Brickson, 2000). However, when organisations emphasize personal achievement, it encourages employees to focus on personal welfare and demotivates them from pursuing others’ welfare (Batson, 1998). Such practices alone may exacerbate the effect of individualist values online.

On the other hand, with collectivist HRM practices such as equality in reward allocation, performance is measured and rewarded not on the basis of individual achievement but on the individual’s group’s achievement (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998), which motivates individuals to enhance their group's welfare over their own welfare (Brickson, 2000; Sherif, 1967). Such practices alone may exacerbate the effect of collectivists’ value online. Consequently, it is proposed that a combination of individualist and collectivist practices within an organisation will have the most positive influence on key outcomes, particularly in comparison with the presence of one or the other of the practices alone.

CONCLUSION

Cultures have been categorized as those promoting individualism (where individuals are separate to the whole) or collectivism (where the overriding principle is that individuals are defined by social contexts to which they belong). The use of online communication increases as organisations continue to adapt and utilize new technology. Given the value dissimilarities between individualists and collectivists, such value dissimilarities across cultures could manifest in online environments. If not properly managed, organisations may face negative outcomes such as increased costs and reduced productivity. Diversity oriented SHRM, namely, the combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM practice’s is proposed as a potential factor that will produce greater efficiency and effectiveness in online communications worldwide.
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