

Cross Cultural Issues in Human Resources

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Abstract

It is common knowledge for the workplace to have people from different cultures interacting with each other. The Human Resources Department is no exception. This research relies on qualitative and quantitative data to explain why it is imperative to have an understanding of cross-cultural issues so that conflict and misunderstandings can be mitigated. Archival data and interviews are used to investigate whether and why individuals perceive communication differently when interacting with people of different cultures. The data has been analyzed and then used to answer the critical question: To what degree does culture impact the way how individuals apply, assess and perceive communication in Human Resources?

1. Introduction

Nowadays, companies have been growing internationally which has created a much more multicultural workforce. This has caused a lot more people to work and travel internationally. In a similar manner, many individuals have come into contact with people from all over the world in some sort of way either in person or remotely. (Derderian, 1993). This has caused to have a melting pot of people mingling and collaborating with each other while aiming for a shared work-oriented goal. More often than not, these individuals will bring with them their cultural practices. As the world becomes more interconnected, it gets a lot more multicultural which in turn demands individuals in to become more aware of each other's differences. As international companies continue to grow, the number of people traveling to different countries becomes greater which in turn increases the demand to become more culturally sensitive. (Derderian, 1993). This is especially important in the Human Resources field where individuals partake in hiring, interviewing and training.

It is important to consider that managers from different cultures often have a different interpretation what an organization is and how the management is executed. (Laurent, 1986). With that said, misunderstandings may arise given certain ways of communicating are different from culture to culture. For that, it is important that people consider becoming more culturally aware of others different from them. Many times, Human Resource Managers fall into the mistake of holding their ideas as dominant and predetermined which can have a negative impact when having to interact with people from different cultures. This, in turn, creates an ethnocentric view from the manager and people which blocks them from learning and understanding other cultures. "In a turbulent changing business environment only those companies that understand the current trends in the global economy are able to survive, develop and prosper." (Mura, 2011, p. 116). What this aforementioned statement claims is that organizations are made out of people and if the people are able to keep up to date with what is going on in the world they will have more prosperity and longevity, these world trends also mean becoming culturally sensitive. In a similar manner, communication and culture go hand in hand. If people are able to communicate with others easily, they will have an easier time

with organizational success. Every person in a company wants to be valued. At the same time, individuals are expected to adhere to these policies which can communicate to them that their voices are not important. This is why communication will not always be fluid given that some individuals may not understand how others interact due to their culture. Aspects such as timeliness, collectivism vs. individualism and high context vs. low context cultures are all example of how traits vary by culture and can play a role on how people communicate or perceive communication. Through a series of three interviews, 15 scholarly articles and an electronic survey this qualitative and quantitative research paper will be aiming to describe cross cultural issues in the Human Resources field and try to answer the research question and hypotheses.

Cultures have many characteristics which make us feel akin to others because they are shared with others who are similar. By definition, "Culture is defined as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group including languages, religion, habits and other social behaviors that are shared." (Sukanya, 2015, p.100). In many aspects, culture has an impact on how we communicate with people and when individuals do not consider differences in cultural communication, conflict may arise. This is why having skills in people management is a crucial part of an organization's success. (Higgs, 1994).

In the workforce, management is a big part of everyday interaction. There is usually a hierarchy and those who are on a higher ladder dictate what is to be done, this however is not always the case. North Americans do not usually view organizations as social systems of relationships that run with power and authority as much as the French and Italian people do. (Laurent, 1986). Given that HR policies and practices often involve training, communication, and employee interaction, they may be particularly susceptible to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and conflicts when it comes to management and authority matters. Organizations which are aware of cross cultural issues gain an advantage and make expand more, especially to emerging markets. (Sukanya, 100).

With that said, dimensions of culture regarding how they structure their societies vary by country, this is the case of those who are high context versus those that are low context. High context cultures tend to have more of an emphasis on body language to deliver messages. Low con-

text cultures are explicit when delivering messages. In general, low context cultures tend to be individualistic whereas high context cultures tend to be collectivistic. (Sukanya, 2015 p. 105). All the aforementioned characteristics will help work towards the objective of this study, which is to answer the research question: *How does culture impact how individuals perceive communication in Human Resources?*

As mentioned before, there are a lot of cultural dimensions which are prompting individuals to become more aware than ever before. "With the opening up of the world economy, the need for understanding cross cultural values is more important." (Sukanya, p. 101). As the world becomes more diverse and interconnected, so does Human Resource Management. However, this comes with some costs as there is more need to train people and become more aware of the cultures that people bring to the work place. "Managing global workforces has increased pressure on Human Resource managers to recognize and adapt cultural differences, which when ignored can result in cross-cultural misunderstandings." (Sukanya, p. 101). It is evident that differences in cultures creates diversity in the workforce, a phenomenon that is growing by the day and is creating the need for people of all social ladders in an organization to learn about the trend. (Higgs, 1994). Some aspects of diversity include, but are not limited to: race, sex, gender, religion, age and ethnicity. Furthermore, other aspects people overlook and are not thought as diversity include: generational differences, marital status and technology usage. These aspects are related to communication because individuals may perceive a message differently depending on their age, current marital status and the extent to which they use technology.

All aforementioned aspects are an important part of this research because when managing and interacting with individuals from other cultures, one has to take into consideration how their culture and the small details that make a difference. Some individuals might value individual achievements more than group achievements and vice versa. Research has shown that all aforementioned aspects have a considerable effect on how individuals go about in an organization. Some advantages of cross-cultural awareness and diversity in Human Resources include: increased diversity tolerance and adaptability, greater customer base and reach, reputation and an increased number of skills to learn from. Nevertheless, there are some cons to diversity in the workforce as well these are: increased chance of conflict and miscommunication, resistance to change, and accommodation. All these cultural characteristics are important to the Human Resources field because a lot of what HR does has to do with managing people.

One is able to see how certain trends have contributed to making people more aware of what is happening around the world, globalization is a good example of this. Human Capital is becoming increasingly important for organizations as the world becomes smaller. (Choo, Halim, Chew, 2010). Organizations that are multinational are starting to require people who are culturally competent in understanding how people operate in different parts of the world.

Taking into account all the aspects that Human Resource Management encompasses, as well as learning about the growing diversity in the workplace and how this can influence the communication for the good and the bad, this research paper will rely on qualitative and quantitative data as well as indirect measures and archival data to answer the research question. These measures will be in the form of academic journals.

2. Key Questions Emerging from the Hypotheses

Having read and analyzed the literature for this study, the research question proposed will be *How does culture impact how individuals perceive communication in Human Resources?*

When talking about culture, there are countless aspects to it. "Culture can be analyzed from a country, language, religion, values, ethical and many other areas of study as a frame of reference." (Sukanya, p. 101). This study's research question will be referring to the aspects of culture of: collectivism versus individualism, timeliness, formality versus informality as well as high and low context cultures. These are all characteristics which are present under the umbrella of culture. Given that managers and individuals are subject to today's global economy, many of them will experience the cross cultural phenomenon either when traveling or at their home. Cross culture happens when individuals experience cultures different from theirs. A manager must be well informed of cultural differences and adapt to them in order to not become obsolete. (Sukanya, 101). This research will be centered on Human Resources Managers who have experienced cross cultural issues. Since there will only be managers being interviewed, only their perspective will be considered. Given that Human Resources is based on managing people, their training, recruitment and development the question makes a good research. Taking into account all aspects of the question, including the variables, this research will be centered in finding an answer to it.

In regards to the research question, the hypotheses are as follows:

H1: The variables measured will have an impact on how communication is perceived.

H2: At least one of the four variables used will have enough reliability in which we can conclude that culture has an impact on people perceive communications.

H3: Culture has no impact on how people perceive communication in Human Resources Management.

3. Method

Participants

Given that part of research consists of interviews, human capital will be needed to conduct them. For this research three individuals in different organizations in Washington DC in the United States will be interviewed. Given that all three people labor in multicultural organizations in the Human Resources, they will be able to share some knowledge on the field as well as experiences in working with people who come from different walks of life. Fur-

thermore, a total of 43 people will take a survey which aims to answer the research question and hypotheses. This survey will use the predictor variables: timeliness, informality vs. formality, collectivism vs. individualism and high context vs. low context cultures. It will be distributed online using the Social Media Platform Facebook and e-mail.

Regarding the subjects, one will be conducted with a former Human Resources Manager in the World Bank, the second with a current Human Resources Manager at the United Nations Association and the third with the Human Resources Coordinator in an organization named Platform Women. Each has worked in organizations with multi-national workforces.

Variables

After having reviewed the literature, the variables included for this study are: timelessness, collectivism vs. individualism, high context vs. low context oriented cultures and formality vs informality. Furthermore, they will be used to measure how these have an impact on how individuals perceive communication. Given that various cultures to some degree display these characteristics, they will be key throughout the research. Moreover, all of the variables used will be related to the questions that will be asked during the interviews. Each variable will have 4 questions. All of them will serve an important purpose in the research as explained below.

Timeliness: This variable is especially important because it is communicated non-verbally. In some cultures time has a different concept. Some cultures value time punctuality more than others as well as how they view this concept. Although punctuality should be a universal value, it tends to vary depending with who the interaction is with. The four questions to measure this variable will be: 1. *Do you find that people you work with have a different concept of time and timeliness? In your experience, how does this vary from culture to culture?* 2. *What are some ways you manage people from cultures who have a strict view of time and those who don't?* 3. *Have any communication misinterpretations happened with individuals who have a strict concept of time and those who do not? How did you manage the situation?* 4. *What are some communication challenges that arise when managing people with strict concepts of time and those with relaxed views on it?*

Collectivism vs. Individualism: Humans as a whole are generally social in nature. We tend to communicate with each other to such degree that it has made us it has become a fundamental part of our existence. However, some cultures value individual merits and needs while others value the group's needs as a whole. These are known as individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively. (Sukanya, 2015). These two characteristics of a culture are important because they can have a perception on how an employee interprets a message from their supervisor and vice versa. Given that reason, it is an important variable to measure. Questions used to measure this variable will be: 1. *Do you find that employees of collectivistic backgrounds have an easier time receiving orders or requests? Why or why not?* 2. *Based on your experience, do you find individuals from collectivistic backgrounds having an easier*

or harder time when working on team projects? Please explain. 3. *What are some communication challenges when communicating with people from both individualistic and collectivistic backgrounds?* 4. *Having observed both individualistic and collectivistic individuals, which seem to communicate better with their peers? Why?*

High Context and Low Context Cultures: There are cultures that put more emphasis on body language when trying to communicate something, these are known as high context cultures. On the flipside, some cultures are more verbally explicit when trying to come across and they are known as low context cultures. This is a fundamental characteristic and variable because in many cases people are unaware of them. Given that high context cultures express more freely with body language, it may be difficult to pinpoint when an individual of a low context culture is doing something wrong and vice versa. This variable will be fundamental for this research. The questions that will be asked to measure this variable include: 1. *Have you ever had any misinterpretation with someone of a high context culture? How did you go about it?* 2. *What impact does nonverbal behavior such as: gestures, facial expressions and closeness to each other have when trying to communicate something to a person of a high context culture?* 3. *Do you find that trust has an impact when communicating with someone of a high context culture? How so?* 4. *What are some communication challenges that are present with both individuals of high context and low context cultures?*

Formality vs. Informality: The way a person addresses another individual can tell a lot about their education and upbringing. However, even formality and the way of addressing others can vary from culture to culture. Countries that view formality as an important aspect also adhere to traditional ranks in the workforce. In the other hand, informal cultures pay less attention to such details. (Sukanya, 2015). For this, it is important to consider this characteristic as a variable given that it is sure to cause a cross cultural issue if not addressed currently. Questions that will be utilized to measure formality vs. informality will be: 1. *As an HR Manager, have you ever had to explain or lay out the rules with a lot of detail to an employee from a culture who expects formality? How did you do it?* 2. *As an HR Manager, when giving people orders, how do the outcomes vary with individuals in cultures that expect formality and those that don't?* 3. *How does your ranks as a manager have an impact when communicating or interacting with people who value informality versus those who value formality?* 4. *What are some communication challenges arising from interacting with employees who value informality versus those that value formality.*

All the 16 questions asked throughout the interview, will aim to answer the research question. Lastly, since this research is measures how culture has an impact on how individuals perceive communication, the dependent variable in this research will be communication.

All the aforementioned variables will play during the interview and all aspects of each will be considered when formulating the questions. With the variables used

and the literature review collected, the study intends to measure how culture has an impact on how individuals perceive communication. Through interviews and archival data, the study will be measuring the aforementioned variables that help answer the research question: *How does culture have an impact on how individuals perceive communication in Human Resources?* These variables include cultural aspects that exist with individuals. When the research is concluded, they should answer questions to come up with new knowledge in job satisfaction, relationship cohesion as well as overall happiness with the job. During the interviews, questions on the person's management/leadership style with the employees, verbal and non-verbal communication as well as miscommunication incidents will be asked. For example, it has been found that collectivism and individualism lead to a lot of miscommunication between people. Other vital aspects that will go along with the study include making sure there are different sources utilized. In the interview, questions regarding the variables timeliness, collectivism vs. individualism, formality vs. informality and high context and low context cultures will be asked in order to get an idea of how they play a role in HR communication.

Procedures and Approach

Given that the research will be qualitative and quantitative, the types of data that used for this research include interviews and archival data as well as a survey. When interviewing, all three interviews will have a traditional approach with questions asked about hypothetical situations and examples of conflict/misunderstandings. The interview to the individual who worked at the World Bank will be done in person at the George Washington University and the other two persons will participate over video-chat. Given that two out three individuals live outside the Washington D.C area, they will be contacted via Skype.

Furthermore, to not interfere with people's work time, the interviews will be done during the time the subjects are free. For that, all three will be contacted individually in order to come to an agreement on what time is best for each. When the actual interview happens with each person individually, the information will need to get logged. In order to do so, consent will be necessary which will enable the information to get recorded on paper and technological device. For that, the individuals will be asked their permission to record their remarks on paper or a voice recorder. If the individuals agree, then the data will be recorded in order to grasp small details that may be missed after the interview is over. In case some person says no, the interviewer will only listen attentively. In a similar manner, the individuals will be receiving by e-mail a text document with the questions asked and their respective answers in order for them to revise their contribution as well being able to edit or tweak any answers. This is especially important when keeping the subjects accountable with the work they do as well as showing respect to their remarks. After having done that, the research done will aim to answer the question: *How does culture have an impact on how individuals perceive communications in Human Resources.* The questions that will be asked will be related to the variables of

interest. Examples of these include: *Do you find that people you work with have a different concept of time and timeliness? In your opinion, how does this vary from culture to culture?* All of this will be conducted by Rene Pinilla, a George Washington student. Considerations to take include when interviewing include: minimizing biases, making sure the questions give answers that are representative enough for the research as well as getting information is as objective as possible.

4. Results

In regards to the interviews with each individual, the answers would vary according to the person asked. All of the interviewees were alright with note taking and recording the data. In general, the results were mixed and varied. At the appendix of this research paper, the answers are recorded for each of the three interviewees.

Descriptive Statistics

The data for the survey was collected using the Qualtrics Survey Software. In total, there were 32 questions in which the participants had to select the answers on a Likert's Scale. A few of the questions, though, asked about the participant's demographic info, including age, gender and ethnic background. This survey was distributed online through social media and e-mail, with the exception of two participants who were asked in person if they wished to participate.

Computing Indices

Using the SPSS software program, all the predictor variables were calculated using an index score. These were, a) Timeliness = ((Timeliness₁ + Timeliness₂/2)), b) Individualism vs. Collectivism, (Individualism + Collectivism/2) c) Formality vs. Informality ((Formality + Informality/2)) and d) High Context vs. Low Context (High Context + Low Context/2). The survey questions for each of the variables was asked with a total of 32 questions. Furthermore, the multiple regression, Cronbach's Alpha and the adjusted r squared value were computed for each predictor variable.

Demographics

All in all, 45 people took the survey. In regards to age of the participants, 76.7% of them were between 20-23 years old, 14% between 23-36, 4.7% between 26 and 30 years old and 4.7% for those 30 and older. Regarding sex, 86% of them were females and 14% were male. Regarding the formal education of people who took the survey, 44.2% had a University Bachelor Degree, 16.3% had a Master degree, 37.2% had some university and around 2% had a PhD. Finally, regarding the person's ethnicity 48.8% of the respondents were Caucasian, 11.6% were East Asian, 9.4% were Latino, 9.3% were other, 7.0% were South Asian, East Asian/Caucasian was 4.7% and South Asian/Caucasian was 7.0%.

Multiple Regression Output

I ran a multiple linear regression to In the case of the multiple regression. Variables that were treated as independent include: communication. Dependent variables included: timeliness, collectivism/individualism, high con-

text/low context cultures and formality/informality. The adjusted r square found was -0.47.

Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha was measured for the indices of timeliness, and the questions that were used to measure the predictor variables. These variables are: timeliness, individualism vs. collectivism, formality vs. informality and high context vs. low context. Given that in order to have reliability, 0.7 or greater must be attained, we can conclude that the overall 0.592 Cronbach's Alpha measure falls under the "poor" category. To break it down by predictor variables, for the Timeliness variable the result gave a Cronbach's Alpha of -0.147, for the formality vs. informality variable the Cronbach's Alpha came to be 0.680 (this puts it in the questionable range), collectivism vs. individualism had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.583, High context vs. low context variable had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.597. All of these predictor variables were analyzed one by one with each containing the questions that measured them.

Hypotheses

H1: Hypothesis #1 is false given that the results do not show that culture has impact on how people perceive communication.

H2: This hypothesis is false given that none of the variables measured were reliable

H3: Hypotheses is correct given that there is no reliability in none of the variables measured. Only formality vs. informality was close to the 0.7 range which makes reliability attainable.

5. Discussion

Summary and Explanation of the Results

All three people that were interviewed agreed to have their results as part of this study. The qualitative data was recorded on paper with their consent while the interview was happening. After that, the answers they gave were logged in an excel sheet to do a coding table. Results for this survey using the SPSS turned out to calculate the different variables of interest. Regarding the survey itself, it was diverse in nature although 86% of the respondents were female and 73.3% of them were between the ages 20 to 23.

Limitations/Directions/Strengths

The research has some limitations to it as no study will be perfect. Firstly, there could always be a bigger sample that can be drawn for future research. Secondly, there are always other variables that can be analyzed. Culture is a multi-dimensional concept and a lot can be learned and researched from it. For this research timeliness, collectivism, individualism, high context, low context and formality were considered. Many other characteristics of culture can be examined such as: religion, gender, sex, clothing, rituals and many others. Another limitation is that some statistical information may be hard to interpret given that many of the respondents put "some college" when asked to select their level of education. This information is an example of how some information can be ambiguous or interpreted in

many different ways. It is important and matters because it could skew the answers and give the research some totally different results. Furthermore, interviewing three persons gives us a small scope of how things really are. We can conclude that having such few people to interview limits our knowledge and research. Also, it is important to note that none of the variables were reliable enough to reach at least the 0.7 mark.

Future Research

All research will always have flaws no matter how it is done. In the future, the research can study other variables of culture that relate to communications in Human Resource Management. Furthermore, in order to make the study more equal, it would be better to have roughly 50% men and 50% women answering the survey questions. This would matter because it would make the research a lot more balanced in gender equality and one would be able to see the perspective of both genders when recording answers on the survey. As mentioned before, it is important to consider the questions answers in order for them not to be ambiguous such as the case of responses like "some college." Also, many of the questions when interpreting the variables could potentially be more open ended and follow the same format with each of the 32 questions. Moreover, it would be great to be able to distribute the survey randomly to each and every person instead of sending it individually to each person by social media and email.

Analysis

After interviewing the subjects, the information collected will then be reduced to end up with relevant qualitative data for the study. There will be a lot of information received yet this will be condensed and transformed to end up with relevant data. In turn, the data will be compared to the archival data. Furthermore, the research will do a content analysis of the interviews in order to look for examples of Cross Cultural issues in Human Resources. In this, it is imperative that the study goes about with an open mind as well as aiming to identify the common themes that exist. Subsequently, the study will underscore the importance of revising the information in order to have the question answered as accurately as possible.

Operationalization of Variables

Through interviews and archival data, the study will be measuring variables that help answer the research question: *How does culture have an impact on how individuals perceive communication in Human Resources?* These variables include cultural aspects that exist with individuals. Timeliness, collectivism vs. individualism and high context vs. low context cultures are all example of how traits vary from culture to culture. When the research is concluded, they should answer questions to come up with new knowledge in job satisfaction, relationship cohesion as well as overall happiness with the job. During the interviews, questions on the person's management/leadership style with the employees, verbal and non-verbal communication as well as miscommunication incidents will be asked. Other vital aspects that will go along with the study include making sure there are different sources utilize. Strengths

of this study include the subjects being used for the research as well as how the study relates culture and how people perceive communication. Scholarly articles and books used in this research have shown there is definitely a relationship between the aforementioned concepts. The study will also make sure the guidelines are laid out before conducting the interview as well as letting them know they can be as open ended as they wish. This is why when interviewing, it is indispensable to be non-biased when asking the questions so the interview be as objective as possible. Furthermore, the study will call for consent of the participants, which also adds to the strength of the research.

However, this study had limitations to it. Given all research has flaws, this one is not the exception. Firstly, it is important to consider that this research is by all means not representative. Given that there were only three knowledgeable subjects that were interviewed, one cannot come to the conclusion that what they are stating is true for all individuals of a certain culture. In a similar manner, the answers the HR managers gave did not take into account their workers opinion. Given that the three HR individuals were asked questions on their perspective, the opinion of the employees was not taken into account. For this, it is important to know the answers will be solely based on their opinions. Similarly, when asking the questions to the subjects, one has to consider that the answers may vary depending on factors such as: how the interview was conducted, how the question was asked and the way the interviewee was approached. In regards to the survey, there will always be errors in them as well. Some individuals did not answer every single question that was given to them which in turn creates data error. It is extremely difficult to have

people's response be accurate all the time. Furthermore, some people may not like the idea of putting in sensitive information such as age, race/ethnicity and other stuff that may profile them. In a similar manner, questions that are ambitious or open ended may not be always be answered honestly. Lastly, qualitative research is very much inferential given that one is not able to know exactly if a person is telling the truth, even in an interview.

It is always important to keep in mind that although the study is aiming to answer the research question, there is a chance that there will be no new results. Individuals perform research and sometimes there is no new knowledge being generated. Nevertheless, the goal of getting an answer is the number one priority, regardless if there is some new research or not. With that said, results of this research will determine if the research question is answered or not given the possibility of not getting one.

Why is this important?

All the research analysis is very important. There is always room for improvement so it is very important to consider details after everything is concluded. In conclusion, this study had some strengths but it did have some drawbacks as well. No research is free from errors but this one aimed to minimize them as much as possible.

The goal is research is to create new knowledge. There will always be people studying different topics and results will vary from one to the other. Research can become like an endless chain where each link is important for the firmness.

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