

# Cross Cultural Issues in IT/ITES Organization- A Pilot Study

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**Abstract-** *The purpose of this paper is to identify the cross cultural issues faced by the employees during their expatriate assignments and suggesting areas to incorporate in cross cultural training programs to address these issues for successful completion of expatriate assignments. This is a pilot study with exploratory research design. Data has been collected from primary & secondary sources from select IT/ITES organization. Findings of this study highlighted the need of well-structured cross-cultural training program. Issues of “Non Verbal Communication”, “Culture Specific Knowledge” and “Immediate Concern” was identified and rated highest by the respondents. Such training program focusing on cross-cultural issues help the employees to prepare for coping with the changes in the working styles, beliefs and values they are expected to face during their expatriate assignment.*

**Keywords-** Culture Difference, Cross-cultural training, Expatriates.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over past two decades the trend of globalization has provided opportunities and challenges both. Globalization acts as an opportunity for many big and small Indian organizations to reach foreign markets with their products and services. To achieve that, there is a need for cross-cultural awareness, appreciation and understanding in the daily operations of international businesses. The business model of many upcoming industries for example IT/ITES sector is dependent heavily on the foreign markets.

This increases the need of professionals working offsite in foreign cultural settings. Furthermore, merger and acquisition activity especially the cross-border acquisitions have reached much higher levels in the recent past. The trend of acquisitions is not only restricted to the sectors like Information Technology, Telecom and Business Process Outsourcing, but core sector companies like Manufacturing, Mining, Retail have also observed spurt in such activities too.

Present study aims at identifying the cross cultural issues faced by the employees during their expatriate assignments and suggesting areas to incorporate in cross

cultural training programs to address these issues for successful completion of expatriate assignments.

In the following section, literature review is mentioned in detail.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cross-cultural Training

The globalization will also bring new employees to the Indian firms, the ones with different origins, languages and national cultures adding complexities to the culture of Indian organizations. The firms thus need to develop systems and processes not only to train managers for expatriate assignments but also to handle cultural diversity. This task can be achieved by well-designed cross-cultural training programs which will help employees in coping up with the stress and cultural shock while dealing with a new culture. The need for cross-cultural training will be for both: Indian expatriates and employees dealing with expatriates of other origins.

The cross-cultural training will also be required for the Indian companies getting into Business Process Outsourcing as the clients belong to culturally different environments. Working effectively in cross-cultural context is becoming vital competence for aspiring managers.

In the following section study will provide description about the Importance of training in cross-cultural environment, dimensions of cultural differences, people and practices: cultural difference, Impact of dealing with a different culture.

### Importance of training in cross-cultural environment:

#### Indian Perspective

Cross cultural differences can and do impede upon communication and interpersonal relationships. In the business world this occurs daily, where people from different cultures interact and are expected to perform and make decisions. Cross cultural training aims to develop awareness between people where a common cultural framework does not exist in

order to promote clear lines of communication and better relationships. Cross cultural training has many benefits to be gained by both participants and businesses. For participants in cross cultural training, benefits are as:

- **People Learn About Themselves:** Through cross cultural training, people are exposed to facts and information about their own cultures, preconceptions, mentalities and worldviews that they may otherwise not have contemplated. Cross cultural training helps people learn more about themselves through learning about others.
- **Encourage Confidence:** Cross cultural training promotes self-confidence in Individuals and teams through empowering them with a sense of control over previously difficult challenges in the workplace.
- **Break Down Barriers:** All of us have certain barriers such as preconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes that obstruct our understanding of other people. Cross cultural training demystifies other cultures through presenting them under an objective light. Through learning about other cultures, barriers are slowly chipped away thus allowing for more open relationships and dialogue.
- **Build Trust:** When people's barriers are lowered, mutual understanding ensues, which results in greater trust. Once trust is established altruistic tendencies naturally manifest allowing for greater co-operation and a more productive workplace.
- **Motivate:** One of the outcomes of cross cultural training is that people begin to see their roles within the workplace more clearly. Through self-analysis people begin to recognize areas in which they need to improve and become motivated to develop and progress.
- **Open Horizons:** Cross cultural training addresses problems in the workplace at a very different angle to traditional methods. Its innovative, alternative and motivating way of analyzing and resolving problems helps people to adopt a similarly creative strategy while approaching challenges in their work or personal lives.
- **Develop Interpersonal Skills:** Through cross cultural training participants develop great people skills that can be applied in all walks of life. By learning about the influence of culture, i.e. the hidden factors upon people's behaviors, those who undertake cross cultural training begin to deal with people with a sensitivity and understanding that may have previously been lacking.
- **Develop Listening Skills:** Listening is an integral element of effective and productive communication. Cross Cultural training helps people to understand how to listen, what to listen for and how to interpret what they hear within a much broader framework of understanding. By becoming good listeners, people naturally become good communicators.
- **People Use Common Ground:** In the workplace people have a tendency to focus on differences. When cross cultural communication problems arise the natural inclination is to withdraw to opposing sides and to highlight the negative aspects of the other. Cross cultural training assists in developing a sense of mutual understanding between people by highlighting common ground. Once spaces of mutual understanding are established, people begin to use them to overcome culturally challenging situations.
- **Career Development:** Cross cultural training enhances people's skills and therefore future employment opportunities. Having cross cultural awareness gives people a competitive edge over others especially when applying for positions in international companies with a large multi-cultural staff base.

Misinterpretations on account of cultural factors can be damaging to a company's business. There is need for greater understanding and adaptability. Not surprisingly, most organizations now consider the adaptability of candidate's right from the recruitment stage. Indeed, adaptability is an essential factor in today's global business environment.

#### **Global Perspective:**

Corporate culture is defined by a shared set of beliefs, myths and practices. As in any other social system, this shared culture binds people together. Culture is a metaphor which can be used to explore the identity of a business. It is about how others see the business, but also how the individuals who work there understand it. Culture offers us a powerful insight into the business and what it is like to work within it. The cultural perspective has become popular in business studies because it offers a way of explaining performance and understanding difference. It is only one way of analyzing business, but it is an interesting one as it focuses particularly on the insider point of view, or on what it is 'really' like to work in an organization.

The strength of an organization's culture can and does affect a company's bottom line. A strong corporate culture stabilizes performance. Performance is more stable for strong-

culture firms in highly competitive markets like motor vehicles, airlines, technology, textiles and apparel.

The shared beliefs that define a corporate culture function as an informal control mechanism that coordinates employee effort. Employees who deviate from accepted practice can be easily detected and admonished faster.

### **Dimensions of Cultural Differences**

There have been many attempts to define cultures and what differentiates them. The study by Hofstede defined and differentiated between cultures on various dimensions – viz. collectivism vs. individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity and long vs. short term orientation. The author (Hofstede, 2001) classified a number of countries on these parameters. These parameters can be defined as:

- Power distance: degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual and a more powerful one in which they belong to same social system.
- Masculinity vs. femininity: refers to the distribution of emotional roles between the genders. It opposes a tough masculine to tender feminine society.
- Uncertainty avoidance: is the extent to which a culture programs its members to feel either comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations.
- Individualism vs. collectivism: is the degree to which individuals are supposed to look after themselves or remain integrated into groups usually around the family
- Long term vs. short-term orientation: refers to the extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of their material, social and emotional needs.

The difference in cultures has been associated with perceptions and paradoxes. The cultural differences and varying approaches lead to significant difference in business practices which must be recognized by the trainers and employees receiving expatriate assignment.

### **People and Practices: Cultural Difference**

The differences in cultures lead to significant differences in the way people react to a stimulus. The motivational needs of the managers and executives vary across the cultures. The motivational factors that work in India may

not be relevant in USA; hence the expatriates will need to understand the basic differences in the employee behavior. The production facilities of firms may be similar across all the subsidiaries but the employee behavior in these facilities may not remain the same. One of the relevant examples in this context is failure of Japanese management technique like Quality Circles in India. The culture differences effect the managerial decisions related to performance appraisals in multicultural workplaces and decisions in international business context.

Along with the business practices and values significant amount of research have been conducted in the context of cross-cultural negotiations. The cross-cultural differences in the negotiation can be conceptualized along four basic dimensions: collectivism-individualism, power distance, communication context, and the conception of time (Cohen, 1997- as cited by Bazerman, Curhan, Moore and Valley, 2000).

The time factor becomes important in the context of cross border acquisitions as people belonging to different cultures have different perceptions related to time, while in some cultures people prefer to start and finish meeting on time (Example: USA), in other people may prefer to take time of their own (Example: Latin America). The time factor also refers to relationship dynamics of negotiations. While in a more collectivist culture, people may prefer to develop relationships during negotiations, people in more individualistic culture like USA may not prefer to bring relationship dimension in the negotiations (Mayfield, Mayfield, Martin, Herbig, 1997). The norms and values related to the negotiations differ according to the culture: perceptions about negotiation to be strategic or synergetic, criteria for selecting the negotiator, importance given to relationship building, concern for protocol and formality etc. The way emotions are expressed in the various cultures may differ, for example the face expressions and hand gestures may convey different meanings in different culture.

### **Impact of Dealing with a Different Culture:**

The cultural change leads to cultural shock, which is a mental state of stress caused by acute changes in the culture. The expatriates tend to feel lonely because all of a sudden everything changes including the work environment, peers, and processes and to an extent organizational culture and value system. The employees react by comparing the new culture to their own values and beliefs and at times are unable to accept the vast difference between the two. The process of encountering and accepting the new changes or in other words

process of acculturation can be classified in four stages (Nicola, 1993)

- Initial stage of elation and optimism
- Period of frustration, depression and confusion
- Gradual improvement of mood leading to optimism and satisfaction
- Mastery stage

The elation stage is a period lasting less than two months. Here the employee is thrilled with the new experience.

The culture shock stage occurs as the individual copes seriously with living in the new culture on a daily basis, as a lack of understanding of the culture inhibits awareness of what is appropriate, or inappropriate, resulting in confusion, frustration, tension and depression.

The frustration occurs as the person begins to realize that past behaviors are inappropriate in the host culture but has not yet learned what behaviors to substitute.

The adjustment stage is characterized by increased ability to adapt in the new culture; and, in the mastery stage, adjustment is about as complete as possible, and anxiety is largely gone.

### **IT/ITES Organization and Types of Cross Cultural Assignment:**

- On site projects: In these kinds of projects employees are sent to client sites in countries like US, UK, Japan etc.
- Matrix team projects: In these projects, Indian teams work remotely in close coordination with cross border teams.
- Offshore deputation: Foreign teams on deputation in Indian offices.

### **Defining Expatriate Competencies**

The expatriates need to perform the same set of functions but in a completely different environment which can cause lot of stress to the person. The cultural stress will have significant impact on various aspects of the job related behavior. Most of the expatriate failures are related to lack of adjustment in new culture. Hence while defining the competencies for the expatriates, human resource professionals also need to assess the soft skills of employees

which will be handy in the new environment like tolerance of cultural difference, ability to adapt new culture and interpersonal relationships. The cross-cultural skills required for successful expatriate assignment can be listed broadly as (Hofstede, 2001):

- The capacity to communicate respect
- The capacity to be non-judgmental
- The capacity to understand relativity of one's own knowledge and perception
- The capacity to display empathy
- The capacity to be flexible
- Tolerance for ambiguity

The focus is clearly on the soft skills and emotional maturity. The people undertaking foreign assignments must be mature and stable enough to accept the existence of cultural differences. They should also be able to understand the context of various situations and happening, which calls for objective evaluation of a situation without bringing in one's own biases and perceptions. The cross-cultural competencies can be viewed as combination of three different dimensions that are self-maintenance dimension (mental health, psychological well-being, stress reduction and self-confidence), relationship dimension (ability to foster relationship with the people of host nations) and perceptual dimension (perceptions of host nation's culture and its social systems).

Thus perceptions have been given an important role in defining competencies. Most often employees tend to make perceptions based little information they receive through the media or stories. This leads to general stereotyping causing formation of wrong notions about the host culture. The employee should instead form opinions and beliefs related to the host nation only after spending considerable amount of time over there. The events which are used to form these perceptions should be seen in depth using the back ground information like social value system, political system and cultural values. Only then a clear picture of host nation culture will emerge. The employees on expatriate assignments must be able to decode various verbal and non-verbal ways of communication used in the new culture and work in unstructured and ambiguous situations.

Hence the employees should have the ability to question the perceptions and resolve conflicts arising out of the cultural differences. The stress management skills have been given importance because the cultural differences and lack of proper socialization along with cultural shock causes stress on the expatriates. The stress might also arise from living at a distance from the family.

### Importance of Cross-Cultural training

The cross-cultural training in general can be defined as —Any intervention aimed at increasing an individual's capability to cope with and work in foreign environment (Tung, 1981, in Zakaria, 2000). Hence cross-cultural training involves all the methods like lectures, simulation etc. used to make the person familiar with a different culture. The term cross-cultural training hence is broad enough to include differences in areas like language abilities, business etiquettes, beliefs and values, social system, negotiating styles etc. of any culture. The cross-cultural training has also been defined as — Formal methods to prepare people for more effective interpersonal relations and job success when they interact extensively with individuals from cultures other than their own (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994). The term job success here seems to be slightly ambiguous, as the factors defining success on an expatriate assignment can include organizational values, earning respect from peers and subordinates, technical skills, interpersonal and relationship management skills etc. The advantages from cross-cultural training have been listed as following (Zakaria, 2000: 2):

- A means for constant switching from an automatic, home culture international management mode to a culturally adaptable and acceptable one
- An aid to improve coping with unexpected events and cultural shock in a new culture
- A means to reduce uncertainty of interactions with foreign nationals
- A means for enhancing expatriates coping abilities

Hence cross-cultural training can be seen as a tool for improving the corporate culture and practices by constantly learning through induction of foreign nationals in the organizations. Further the cross-cultural training will help to reduce the psychological stress and cultural shock which often lead to failure of expatriates.

### Training Methods

The cross-cultural training evolved with usage of lecture method (originated from university of Illinois- as referred by Bhawuk and Brislin, 2000). This development was followed by usage of contrast American method which was named as this method was used to train for contrasting cultural experiences. The scenarios and cultural assimilators were later additions to the methods. The self-reference criterion method was developed from cultural analysis system developed in 1966. The first usage of the cultural assimilators was on the American soldiers in 1972. The existence of cultural general

assimilator is relatively new with usage starting in 1986. The experiential and area simulation were developed in 70's.

The various cross-cultural training methods can be explained as follows ( Bhawuk and Brislin, 2000).

- Cultural assimilator: The cultural assimilator is a tool that consists of a number of real life scenarios describing puzzling cross-cultural interactions and expectations. The scenarios here can be defined as critical incidents which describe interactions between host and expatriates which involve misunderstanding related to cultural differences.
- Contrast American method: This method involves demonstration of behaviors that are completely opposed to what is seen in the current context of culture. This was used by Stewart in America to train people going abroad hence was named contrast American.
- Self-reference criterion (SRC): Unconscious reference to one's own cultural values in communication with people who are from other cultures. This method was developed by Lee (1966), who proposed 4 step procedures to overcome self-reference criteria. The first step involves defining any problem of situation in terms of the expatriate's own culture, followed by definition in the terms of host culture. The bias created by SRC is analyzed and removed in third stage which is followed by solution of the simplified business problem.
- Area simulation: The simulation is creating natural situation of interaction with people from other culture. This can be achieved using some actors who will interact with the trainee according to some predefined script.
- Cultural self-awareness model: The cultural awareness model includes usage of video tapes with themes and role plays. If the trainee is able to understand how his culture is different he would be able to accept the differences encountered in the real life interactions in a better manner.

The study by Caligiuri refers to the study by Brislin et. Al.,(1983) outlined the frequently used cross-cultural training methodologies during early 90's:

- Fact-oriented training;
- Attribution training, associated with the culture assimilator to enable trainees to internalize values and standards of the host culture;
- Cultural awareness training, the study of the trainee's home culture and its effect on his/her behavior to enable

the trainee to understand the nature of cultural differences;

- Cognitive-behavior modification, to assist trainees to be able to obtain rewards and avoid punishment in the host culture;
- Experiential learning, active participation learning about a specific host culture; and
- Interaction learning, for trainees to feel more comfortable with host nationals and to learn details about life in the host country. Language training aids in communications demonstrate an attitude of attempting to learn about the host culture enables one to be polite and permits understanding.

### Existing training practices in IT/ITES Organisation:

At present typically the employees involved in global projects are taken through a 4 hours long workshop that covers:

- Information about client
- Information about location of deputation.
- Basic language skills.
- Accent neutralization session

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Present study is designed to study the following objectives:

- To identify the cross cultural issues faced by employees during their expatriate assignments.
- To propose areas of improvements in the cross cultural training programs.

In the following section the methodology is described in detail.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Sample: Present pilot study follows the exploratory research design. For the purpose of pilot study we have identified one IT organization based on the number of expatriate assignments per employee per year.

Data has been collected from selected IT organization from two sources.

1. Primary Data: Collected by conducting face to face interview employees, project managers, training managers, human resources team and interactions with members of other IT organizations

2. Secondary data: Collected from various websites, journals, magazines, articles and research papers.

Sample size was 50 employees representing different departments in IT/ITES organization.

### Findings:

After analysis of the data collected by primary sources on different cross cultural issues, findings were discussed below:

It has been found that all fifty respondents were involved in projects that require engagement with international teams. This clearly indicates that total sample for this pilot study was closely associated with individual of different culture.

In response to a question, “Are there any kind of issues faced as a result of cultural difference during global project?” Majority (92%) of the respondents agreed that they do face some or the other issue related to culture differences.

Next we ask the respondents to rate nine different issues they faced during their expatriate assignment related to culture difference. We found that respondents (16 out of 50) have rated “Non-verbal Communication” example; facial expression, eye movement etc. as highest and considered it as extremely important. Further ratings are mentioned below:

Rating	No. of Responses
2.... Culture specific knowledge (time, space, roles)	10
3.... Immediate Concerns (currency, school system)	9
4.... Emotional Reaction (cultural shock, homesickness)	5
5.... Culture Sensitivity (anxiety, ethnocentrism)	4
6.... Area Specific Knowledge (history, geography, politics)	3
7.... Language Training	2
8.... Skill Acquisition (Simulations, case study, role plays)	1
9.... Others	

Further, in response to rank the business practices that respondents are aware before conducting business with other countries from most important to least important .We found that respondents have rated formal versus informal as most important parameter and others as least important .Different ratings are as mentioned below:

Business Practice	No. of Responses
Formal vs Informal	23
Direct Vs Indirect style of communication	15
Punctuality	6
Negotiating	4
Others	2

We were also interested to measure the level of awareness they possess before actually travelling for expatriate assignment. For this we ask the respondents to rank the identified issues related to culture difference from most important to least important that they are aware of before travelling to other country. It was found that, 14 respondents have given the highest rating to non verbal communication. Lowest rating has been given to skill acquisition by only one respondent. Other rating descriptions were mentioned below:

Rating	No. of Responses
2.... Culture specific knowledge (time, space, roles)	10
3.... Immediate Concerns (currency, school system)	9
4.... Emotional Reaction (cultural shock, homesickness)	7
5.... Culture Sensitivity (anxiety, ethnocentrism)	4
6.... Area Specific Knowledge (history, geography, politics)	3
7.... Language Training	2
8.... Skill Acquisition (Simulations, case study, role plays)	1
9.... Others	0

Next we collected responses on type of trainings conducted by the IT organization selected for pilot study. We found that, cent percent trainings were of in-house in nature. No external agency is involved to impart training or developing any content module for cross cultural training programs in select organization.

Further, to assess the success rate of expatriate assignments we asked the respondents “Are there any expatriate who return early from the assignments?” We found that majority (84%) employees agreed on early return of expatriates to home country.

It clearly indicates the area of sincere concern by IT organization to relook the training program designed for employees going for expatriate assignments and address the issues rated highest in terms of its importance.

It is very interesting to note that nearly 50% (24 out of 50 in numbers) respondents have given culture difference or culture related issues as the primary reason for returning early from expatriate assignments to home country. Further, the second important reason is due to family issues as mentioned by 10 employees. Seven respondents viewed language barrier as the third most important reason followed by “could not adopt”, “lack of motivation”, “others” given by 5, 3 and 1 respondents respectively.

Further, we assessed the gap between the culture related issues ranked by respondents and coverage of same issues in existing expatriate training programs offered by select IT organization. It was found that 13 respondents agreed that “Skill acquisition” is addressed during the existing training program. Whereas, “Language training”, “Area specific knowledge, and “Cultural Sensitivity” are mentioned by 10, 7 & 6 respondents respectively.

It is interesting to note, that “Non-Verbal Communication”, “Culture Specific Knowledge” and “Immediate Concern” issues have been rated highest by 16, 10 & 9 respondents in response to their level of awareness required before travelling for expatriate assignment. But it clearly indicates from the results that there is a wide gap between the expectations of trainees (expatriate) and the existing training module.

In the last, we found that 94% of respondents opined about the urgent need to redesign the training module and only 6% viewed that there is no need to change the content of training program.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

It is imperative that employees who are to be expatriated are well informed regarding the challenges they might face in a foreign land. Coping with a foreign culture both organizational and national needs well-planned preparation. A well-structured cross-cultural training will help the employees to prepare for coping with the changes in the working styles, beliefs and values they are expected to face. A large degree of uncertainty which an employee might face while moving to a foreign land and culture can be reduced through organizational support in terms of training. The huge costs that an organization might face due to expatriate failure are of high concern. Preparing the employees for a foreign assignment is mutually beneficial to the organization and the employee. For the employees, a well delivered training can help in managing with the new situations, while for the organization this helps in getting the best of the employee in terms of work output through maintaining the employee morale and motivation. With the growing influence of foreign markets and increasing growth prospects for multinational business models, it is of high importance that companies prepare their employees to be fit for global assignments.

Following measures can be taken to develop robust cross cultural training program for employees/expatriates.

- ❖ Creation of a manual/handbook for employees, with details on cultural sensitivity and understanding of non-verbal communication for various countries.
- ❖ Formulating a workshop with real exercises and role plays.
- ❖ Organize Counselling sessions for employees going on foreign assignments.
- ❖ Counselling and training for families (in cases where the employee is taking the family members along)

#### V. FUTURE RESEARCH & LIMITATIONS

Present research was conducted at small level to test the reliability of constructs and issues identified for cross cultural training program. Future researchers can plan an empirical research focusing on one or more sector.

Current study was limited to only IT organization, so we suggest testing it further with empirical research at macro level to generalize the findings.

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