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INTERCULTURAL communication

Abstract: Discusses the use and selection of technology in cross-cultural business communication. Counterproductive effect of technology in communication; Context content of various communications; Creating context using facilitation techniques; Aspects to consider in selecting communication technologies.

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HOW TO COMMUNICATE GLOBALLY

Email and voicemail can make communicating with colleagues in other countries easier, but such technologies can also be counter-productive. Here's how to choose what to use and when.

Technology makes communication easier, especially across international borders, right? Not necessarily. Although Western companies are making major investments in technologies designed to make their global communications more efficient, such tools are often underused and even counterproductive in cross-cultural business environments. You need to consider several factors before selecting which technology to use and in which context.

As for what can go wrong, consider the case of videoconferencing in Thailand. An American firm had invested in the installation of Videoconferencing facilities in its Thailand subsidiary. In addition to enabling communication with other sites around the world, the new Videoconferencing capability was intended to increase the productivity of the firm's local Thai employees. Many would have to spend an entire day traveling the crowded roads between the company's outlying factory to attend a meeting at Bangkok headquarters. It was thought that videoconferencing would make such travel unnecessary. But things didn't quite turn out as planned. The Thais had trouble getting used to the new technology. The former managing director of the Thai subsidiary, a U.S. expatriate,

remembers ruefully: "I soon found out that the local managers were conducting the videoconference for my benefit and then arranging to have a face-to-face meeting afterwards. They still wanted to be able to meet in person to gauge the reaction of others."

So, instead of creating greater efficiency, the new videoconferencing facility resulted in additional meetings and extra costs.

In another example, an Asian customer service representative, Emily Liu, had been working at her job for several years, in which she felt that she'd developed good teamwork and joint operating procedures with her U.S. customer service counterpart. When there was a customer issue that required help from the United States, Liu knew she could contact that person and he would respond quickly and efficiently. They had even met in person and maintained regular contact.

Suddenly however, everything changed. When Liu checked her email one morning, she found a message that a new organizational structure was in place and that the customer service function at U.S. headquarters had been eliminated. For customer service issues, she was now instructed to contact the appropriate marketing representative for each product. It wasn't made clear who that person would be (and it would probably differ case by case). Liu's longtime U.S. customer service counterpart sent a short note of regret that they'd no longer be working together and said he'd been transferred to a different function.

For Liu, it was insulting and discouraging to receive an email that severed her main link to headquarters, eliminated her personal contact, and left her with no clear alternatives. She said, "At least, they could have done: it by videoconference--not by email. Now, I have to start over." Other customer service representatives around the world were informed in the same impersonal fashion, and several left the company.

Context is the core

The very ease that technology brings to global communication can become

a source of difficulty. David Ancel, an expert in this area, observes: "If you travel 18 hours and 10,000 miles to Asia and you step off the plane and are hit by the heat and humidity, you know that you're someplace different and you're going to have to make some adjustments. But if you send an email from your desk or walk around the corner to a videoconference room, you haven't moved at all off of your cultural space."

In other words, simple and instantaneous long-distance communication can increase the potential for misunderstanding by making the need for cultural adjustment less obvious.

Context is perhaps the core intercultural issue when using communications technologies. The United States, Canada, and northern European nations are defined as low-context cultures, meaning that the verbal content of a message is more important than the medium--the setting through which the message is delivered. In such cultures, a videoconference or an email is usually accepted as an efficient substitute for an in-person meeting.

But in other countries--including many in Asia and the Middle East--context, or setting, with its myriad nonverbal cues, can convey far more meaning than the literal words of a given message. In such high-context cultures, business transactions are ritualized, and the style in which the rituals are carried out matters more than the words. A high value is placed on face-to-face interaction, and after-hours socialization with customers and colleagues is almost a daily occurrence. Companies that depend on low-context communication technologies to replace context-rich forms of human interaction unwittingly place the members of high-context cultures at a disadvantage.

When developing a global communications strategy, it's important to consider the amount of context available through different types of interaction. A person-to-person meeting covers a whole range of possible interactions--including informal contact (in the hallway outside of a meeting); a physical exchange (handshake or bow); nonverbal cues (facial expressions, gestures); immediate feedback; and voice tone. The progression from personal meeting to email

shown in the box involves a declining loss of context.

The point isn't that high-context forms of communication are always better, but that it's essential to select the communication style most appropriate for the people and the purpose involved. George Renwick, a veteran consultant on intercultural issues who has worked in China, points out that low-context communications may be acceptable or even preferable when there's a strong rapport between the parties. Renwick tells about two friends, one an HR manager and the other a company president, who worked together in a Taiwan-based company for many years. "The HR manager was one of the few people in the company who had the nerve to inform the president when she felt that he was on the wrong track. But rather than tell him to his face, she (and he) found it easier for her to send him a pointed email message."

Creating context

In general, important messages are best communicated through high-context means. Many people prefer to make vital decisions or receive good or bad news in a face-to-face setting, though that varies from culture to culture. In the United States, it's acceptable to introduce oneself, approach customers, and transact large business deals over the telephone. But that would not be acceptable in many other countries.

What frequently works best in a cross-cultural setting is to build context. You can do that by arranging for a face-to-face meeting early in the relationship. The parties can agree on a regular, mutually acceptable means of communication--whether via videoconference, voicemail, email, fax, or a combination. If regular meetings in person aren't possible due to time, distance, or expense, using multiple media helps create context. For example, a fax containing background information can help an overseas counterpart prepare for a phone call, which can be followed up by an email to confirm any points.

You can also create context by using the facilitation techniques typically applied in face-to-face meetings. Prior to a videoconference,

for instance, you can circulate written background material, an agenda, a seating chart, and biographical information about the participants. During the videoconference, the facilitator introduces people, acts as a gatekeeper to bring everyone into the conversation, and defines unfamiliar terms and concepts.

It's essential that context be a joint creation and not something imposed. For example, U.S. workers sometimes assume that English is the language of global business and shower their colleagues abroad with rapid-fire speech or a deluge of complex documents. No matter what language is being used, it's important to modify one's speech and be more selective in what materials to circulate. Another aspect of shared context is the time at which communication takes place. It's important to remember that it might be midnight for someone else.

It's always worth asking the involved parties for their preferred method of communication. After all, the ultimate purpose of communication is to enhance human relationships, not replace them. Though technology is changing the way we communicate globally, the means must match people's preferences and work habits across cultures in order to be effective. By committing to the form in which a conversation will occur, participants from different parts of the world become more willing to contribute actively.

Here are the main aspects (and relevant questions) to consider when trying to select the appropriate communication technologies.

Availability. To what extent are the various technology options readily available to everyone involved in a geographically dispersed work group? Which technologies can be used regularly without putting anyone at a disadvantage?

User skills. Is everyone adequately skilled and comfortable with the different technology options?

Cultural variables. Is the communication taking place with members of low- or high-context cultures? Are there other cultural requirements or preferences?

Level of rapport. How well do the people who are communicating know each other? Does rapport or its lack affect the level of needed context?

Importance of the message. Is the message of sufficient priority to dictate a high-context medium, or will a low-context form of communication suffice?

Ways to build context. Are there means for creating greater context to enhance participation, such as in-person meetings, multiple media, and facilitation techniques?

A regular pattern. Is there a communications agreement so that participants know when to expect messages and in what form?

Language modification. When one language is used, are the native speakers considerate in their speech and transmission of written materials to nonnative speakers?

Time windows. Do all parties know and respect the most convenient times to send and receive messages across time zones? Are there ways to share private contact numbers that will improve communication while respecting people's personal lives?

User choice. Have the participants in a given transaction been asked how they would prefer to communicate? The answers should start you in the right direction for an effective global communications strategy.

Example of decisionmaking matrix

Level of Rapport	Context Required
LOW	HIGH
	Person-to-person Videoconferencing Telephone Voicemail Fax and Groupware E-mail