Editorial Preface

Cross-Cultural Research in IS

Guest Editor: Roberto Evaristo
University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

It is hard not to notice that an increasing number of cross-cultural studies in Information Systems are being published in JGIM and other similarly oriented outlets in the last few years. Such trend, albeit to a lesser extent, is also seen in other top tier mainstream publications. For instance, in February of 2003 there was a special issue on “Cultural Issues and IT Management” in *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*. Earlier calls for “field maturation” seem to have been heeded, resulting in studies not only relevant but also rigorous. This is true notwithstanding the inherent difficulties in performing high quality cross-cultural research; funding, coordination and time delays are just some of the key issues that come to mind.

I have been personally involved with the organization of the CCRIS meetings (“Cross-Cultural Research in IS” Annual Meeting) concurrently with ICIS for the last 10 years. This involvement was the genesis of the idea for this issue: a selection of some of the best papers presented there during the last few years. In addition to the original review process to include papers in the CCRIS meeting, several of the papers underwent a rigorous review process with multiple revision cycles. The final result reflects the subset of papers presented here. It has been long in coming, but I believe the reader will enjoy the outcome.

There are four papers in this issue. In this set of papers, cross-cultural research has been interpreted in an unusually wide perspective; not only across “national” cultures but also across narrower definitions of culture. This viewpoint is becoming more accepted. Straub *et al.* (2002), for instance, argue that an individual is actually influenced by different cultures: ethnic, professional, organizational, etc. Martinsons and Davison (2003) suggest that these alternative perspectives may be instrumental in the development of much needed theory building in this area, without decreasing the rigor in the studies (Karahanna, Evaristo, & Srite, 2002). As a set, the papers in this issue recognize that different “flavors” of culture differentiation are likely to create a range of difficulties for information management. The challenge consists in not only understanding the problems and their roots, but learning how to take advantage of the potential synergies resulting from cultural pluralism (e.g., Rose, Evaristo and Straub, 2003).

In the first paper, Pauleen examines the negotiation of historical claims between the New Zealand government and an indigenous Maori group. Using a combination of action learning and grounded theory research methodologies, he analyzed the data originating from a series of face-to-face and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) supported meetings to find an emergent effect of team culture as opposed to the more traditional national culture interpretations.

Next, Kaarst-Brown and Wang also take a different view of culture (and national culture) by presenting it as the developmental
context in which small businesses, largely owned or managed by foreigners from other cultures, must interpret and cope with national infrastructure challenges. Their research presents findings from a case study of the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) in the British West Indies area of the Caribbean. The perceptions of TCI’s infrastructure challenges, and the small firm’s coping mechanisms, are interpreted through the eyes of outsiders striving to prosper in the rapidly growing Caribbean economy. Kaarst-Brown and Wang’s findings provide insights into the importance of entrepreneurial smaller firms and small-scale foreign investment, including the commitment, information intensity, and cross-national transfer of technology expectations within a culture moving from infancy to adolescence on the global financial front.

The last two papers raise cross-cultural issues in the more traditional sense. Mason discusses the subject of how knowledge management systems and their use is affected by cultural differences. Starting from the premise that one of the uses of knowledge management systems (KMS) is to facilitate learning, he discusses how culture and approaches to learning are inextricably connected. Although that would suggest that KMS should have culture-based implementations, reviews of KMS and KMS efforts revealed little attention directed toward the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of staff, in fact implementing a “culture-free” perspective. He convincingly argues the limitations of such approach, questioning the implied denial of stakeholder diversity and its role in surfacing the tacit knowledge of multi-cultural KM implementations. Implications for KM research and practice are drawn.

In the final paper, I address the problem of how to manage projects where the stakeholders are not only geographically dispersed but also originate from multiple cultures. I propose a model that incorporates trust being impacted by cultural differences and as a direct factor in performance levels, as well as a moderator of the relationship of the following three processes with performance: transition team processes, action team processes, and interpersonal team processes. Since these processes encompass tasks with varying levels of task formalization and complexity, characteristics that are clearly managed better by stakeholders from different national cultures, I propose that the teams with the best fit between task characteristics and culture—in presence of trust—will have the best performance. Anecdotes from my own prior research plus other published minicases buttress the arguments. Based on the interpretation of the model I then provide practical and research guidelines.

I would like to thank not only all the authors who submitted their papers to CCRIS but also the anonymous reviewers and the meeting attendees. This special issue of JGIM is yours: It would not have been possible without your effort.

REFERENCES


