The Management of Distributed Projects Across Cultures

Roberto Evaristo, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT

A model of cross-cultural distributed project management is proposed. The model is based on recent theoretical developments regarding trust and team processes, and suggests that trust relates to cultural differences between distributed members. Trust affects project performance in two key ways: through the traditional view of main effects on performance, and via moderating effects on other determinants of performance in distributed projects. We also use a task characteristics categorization, together with several mini-case studies, to create a set of guidelines for best practices for management of cross-cultural distributed projects.

Keywords: cross-cultural; virtual teams; distributed projects; project management

INTRODUCTION

Virtual organizations are increasingly becoming the focus of attention in different literatures. In particular, much research has been carried out in the area of virtual teams and how groupware is able to support such teams. An essential component of the rise of use of virtual teams is the geographical distribution afforded by the globalization of businesses as well as the availability of inexpensive, advanced information and communication technologies (ACT).

This geographical distribution increases the chance that members of such teams originate from different cultures. Differences in expectations and value-laden behaviors resulting from culture clash create performance and personal relationship issues. Although some of these problems are addressed in the literature, one large frontier remains unexplored: the management of cross-cultural differences and their consequences that are inherent in distributed projects.

Project management knowledge and
application has been for a long time de-
voted to single-site, single projects (Turner,
1993, 1995). Recently, several authors have
started to discuss different issues occur-
rning either when projects are composed of
many sub-projects—also called programs
(Graham, 2000)—or are spread across dif-
ferent locations, in a “virtual” or “distrib-
uted” project. The latter situation creates
several logistical and management problems
that are exacerbated by cultural differ-
ences.

This manuscript discusses issues as-
sociated with managing distributed projects
across different cultures. It is mostly con-
ceptual, but it also includes descriptions
taken from mini case studies conducted by
the author in Japan (Evaristo & Scudder,
2000), USA (Suleiman, Evaristo, & Kelly,
2000), Germany (Evaristo, 2001), and Nor-
way.

We will discuss in more detail what a
distributed project is, its differences from a
traditional project, and the resulting need
for a customized way to manage it. We
then present a proposed model to manage
distributed projects, emphasizing the direct
and moderating role of trust in the perfor-
mance of cross-cultural distributed projects
under cultural differences. Finally, based
on the model, we offer recommendations
on how to best manage distributed, cross-
cultural projects.

DISTRIBUTED PROJECTS

The overwhelming number of projects
described in the research-oriented litera-
ture as well as most of the practical and
theoretical developments in this area is fo-
cused on single, stand-alone projects. This
is also true for practitioner-oriented books
on how to perform project management
(e.g., Lock, 1996). A few exceptions de-
scribe multiple-site instead of single-site
projects: for instance, sets of smaller
projects that, although performed indepen-
dently, need to be managed concurrently
by the same management team. These sets
are defined in the literature as “programs”
(Van Der Merwe, 1997).

In fact, a careful analysis of other
examples in the literature suggests that
there are more types of projects than the
single site–multiple site dichotomy de-
scribed above seems to suggest. For in-
stance, Kumar (1996) describes a software
development project where most of the
developers were in India and the client in
the U.S. In this case, they were separated
by thousands of miles, 12 time zones, and
by cultural and religious differences, but
were still working on the same project, char-
acterizing a single project involving multiple
non-collocated sites. This type of project
differs from the previous two examples
because now the non-collocated stakehold-
ers are working on the same project, and
we will define it here as “distributed
projects.”

The fundamental differences in co-
ordination and resource needs across sites
in programs (little), or across sites on a
single but distributed project, led Evaristo
and Fenema (1999) to two conclusions.
One, that qualitatively different manage-
ment approaches would be critical for suc-
cessful completion of such projects; and
two, that before attempting to address such
differences, it would make sense to inquire
whether these three types of projects were
indeed a complete set of project types. The
resulting work developed a typology of
projects that included exploration of alter-
natives (e.g., multiple distributed projects
with shared locations). The crucial differ-
ences among them relate to both increasing
difficulties in communication and coor-
dination of interdependent shared resources.
For instance, co-located programs have
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