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The Role of Culture during Internationalization

Dr. Fred Appiah Fening

Associate Professor, Department of Management and International Business,
Webber International University, Scenic Hwy., Babson Park, USA

Michael Asare Appiah

Lecturer, Takoradi Polytechnic, Takoradi, Ghana

Abstract:

This paper investigates the role of culture during internationalization, covering many aspects that contribute to cultural make up. The current pace of the internationalization of businesses brings to the fore the importance of culture and its roles in the whole of process of internationalization and the performance of an internationalized organization in the long run. With an increasing number of businesses turning to foreign markets, internationalization is becoming more common. With an understanding of cultural differences and potential areas for problems during internationalization, it is apparent that the most prominent aspects of culture for international businesses are that of communication, both verbal and non-verbal communication. Although little research has been done on the topic so far, the importance of communication and the problems arising from cultural differences in non-verbal cues as well as misinterpretation during translation of information from one language to another appears as the number one issue of cross-cultural integration. Overall however, culture as a whole does have profound effects on companies internationalizing, with a number of aspect of culture needing a great deal of attention in order to begin operating with foreign markets.

Keywords: *Internationalization, culture, attributes of culture*

1. Introduction

The business world is changing and it is changing very fast. Companies today are operating around the world more than ever before to increase sales, capital and performance, and spread risks and to gain competitive advantage. Internationalization has been the focus of several studies and it is not a new concept (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Johanson & Vahlne, 2006; Crick & Spence, 2005). This process of internationalization has been made possible due to the advancement of technology, communication, movement of capital, decrease in trade barriers etc (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Hitt, Franklin, & Zhu, 2006). However, for these companies to succeed in different international markets, they need to understand the culture of these international markets. Culture is very prevalent and a significant aspect to the world we live in; it defines who we are and represents our individuality as humans. In today's society, the presence of cultural differences is something that we are exposed to regularly, and can even relate to on a number of levels. These differences can be applied to all aspects of life, but are particularly recognized throughout academia and business. We try to understand the numerous situations that organizations expanding globally are facing. As we have learned over time, with the various advancements in technology and the ease of communication and travel, global growth and expansion has become highly simplistic for businesses compared to that of the past. Although these advancements have allowed for organizations to internationalize with more ease than before, corporations are still facing some difficulty transitioning, due in part to the cultural differences between the host and home countries involved. With big business becoming increasingly prevalent in today's society, companies that are yet to gain international status and recognition are looking to expand their business beyond the borders of their home countries (Appudurai, 1996). Amann, (2003) has stated, "geographic expansion abroad offers the vast potential benefits of a much larger market arena, spread risk, location-based cost efficiencies and exposure to a variety of new products and process ideas" (p.1). The term 'internationalization' was coined, many years ago and researchers, businessmen and academic minds alike have been unable to produce a conclusive definition as to how to explain this process. Cohen (1997) describes the process as the widely accepted notion of the outward movement in a company's international operations. Overall, the consensus seems to imply that internationalization is increasing operations in the international market.

Looking past the semantics of an evidently multifaceted matter, it is inevitable that beginning to operate in foreign lands will not come without its complexities, lessons to be learned and mistakes to be made. As more and more companies begin to look past their domestic borders in hope of expanding their organizations, it is becoming increasingly important to have a comprehensive understanding of what is needed to begin operating in a new country, not only of rules, regulations and other aspects which typically spring to mind when thinking about business, but of the new group of people the company will be employing and marketing to and what is considered as normality to them (Park, Fables, Parker & Nitse, 2010).

For many organizations, the role of culture is a major consideration that is often overlooked, and rarely given enough thought as a deciding factor of success or failure (Shikida, Araujo & SantAnna, 2011). Many aspects of human interaction and expectations change drastically from country to country. These variations are based on individual upbringing and social standards, and therefore must be researched, and adjusted for in each new market. Internationalization will struggle to live up to its potential if it fails to take into account and accurately interpret cultural differences (Park, Fables, Parker & Nitse, 2010). Regardless of the new country of operations, the cultural values and perceptions of each individual culture are unlikely to be in any way similar to that of the domestic market. Therefore, any company looking to internationalize must be willing to undergo an intense and meticulous lesson in cultural differences (Thiederman, 1991).

This paper will focus on how the role of culture and the many facets attributed to the assembly of culture, affect the process of internationalization. It will outline the positives and negatives behind the process and look to clearly state the major points of consideration for companies to endure when looking to operate with new and different cultures.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Internationalization

Internationalization, as understood by many people, is a company beginning to operate within a foreign market. Although in many aspects, this is correct, it does not fully define the act of Internationalization. Although the concept is not defined by a single definition, the explanation provided by many researchers that have delved further into the topic, do seem to construct definitions that hold some common ground. Internationalization as defined by different researchers include: Welch and Luostarinen (1988) who state that it is the “process of increasing involvement in international operations” (p.36); Johanson and Vahlne (1977) “the process in which a firm increases their international involvement” (p.23); Andersen (1997) “the process of adapting exchange transaction modality to international markets” (p. 29). However, not all researchers view the process in regards to an inward procedure. It is also said that internationalization is “bringing new foreign operations within the boundaries of a firm” (Hitt et al, 1997, p.767). Lastly, Beamish et al. (1997) define the word internationalization as “the process by which firms increase their awareness of the influence of international activities for their future, and establish and conduct transactions with firms from other countries” (p. 3).

Regardless of whether or not the process is seen as an inward or outward process, it seems clear that internationalization is in its most basic form, a company interacting in one way or another with foreign companies or foreign markets (Loth & Parks, 2002). However, internationalization must not be seen simply as importing and exporting, it is far more thorough than that. Internationalization can of course include international trade (import and export) but, it can include investment and ownership in foreign firms, or foreign ownership and/or investment in a domestic firm. It may also be the inner works of a company, including such as aspects dealing with manufacturing and sourcing, finance, technology, research and design and possibly one of the most over looked aspects of internationalization, the customers.

In essence, any aspect of a company that operates outside, or deals with entities that are outside of domestic borders is engaging in internationalization. But the question must be asked, why would companies deal with the hassle involved? It is obvious that opportunities greater than those available in a domestic market are more accessible when a company has many countries to compete in, but once borders have been crossed, a great deal of complications come into effect. However, as is explained by Gupta and Westney (2003), the decision can be justified by virtually every measure, growth in international trade, foreign direct investment and cross-border flows of technology. Arnold and Quelch (2003) support the argument how emerging markets account for the biggest opportunities for growth for companies today.

2.2. Culture

Culture is everything that the people in a society have learned and share through traditions, pass on to children, and teach new members; this includes religion, beliefs, political ideologies, values, customs, foods, language, gender roles, sexuality, and many other aspects of everyday life. Schein (2010) has indicated that it “is a set of assumptions about what is real and how to determine or discover what is real” (p. 116). Over the last three decades and more, the effects and impact of companies that are active globally has increased a great deal. It has been the subject of intensive academic debate for more than thirty years, and it has a lot of attention from various researchers, and Martin (1992) has stated that despite all the attention and research it “has no theoretical paradigm that cultural researches share” (p. 4). As many companies begin to take advantage of the opportunities that have arisen in emerging markets, their competitors have had to take action and follow the herd in order to stay competitive. Regardless of which country a company chooses to start doing business in, the issue involving culture and the effects of culture on internationalization do come into question. Understanding and incorporating foreign cultures into the daily activities of a global firm is vital for success (Amann, 2003). Avoiding or failing to recognize and conform to cultures in countries of operation, would not only substantially decrease the likelihood of success, but may even cause irrevocable damage to a company’s reputation, eliminating any chance for succeeding in the future (Welch & Welch, 1997). That said, the first step for success when going international is to understand the concept of culture.

In its most basic of forms, culture can be seen as a set of distinct qualities. However, interpreting such a vague description and trying to incorporate it into a system of business would be near impossible (Loth & Parks, 2002). Delve into the topic further and it becomes apparent that culture is a far more complicated topic than originally anticipated. Culture is socially learned and transmitted by members; it provides the rules for behaviour within organizations (Jen-Te, 2007). Allaire & Firsirotu (1984) define culture as inferred ideational codes lying behind the realm of observable events” on the one hand, and as an “integrated element of the social system showing in certain social behaviors and manifesting in more materialistic cultural products” (p. 197). Schein (2010) also defined

culture as “pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those processes” (p. 18). Louis (1985) “Culture is a set of understandings or meanings shared by a group of people. The meanings are largely tacit among the members, are clearly relevant to a particular group, and are distinctive to the group” (p. 74). Mills (1988) states, “cultural arrangements, of which organizations are an essential segment, are seen as manifestations or a process of ideational development located within a context of definite material conditions. It is a context of dominance (males over females/owners over workers) but also of conflict and contradiction in which class and gender, autonomous but over determined, is vital dynamics. Ideas and cultural arrangements confront actors as a series of rules of behavior; rules that, in their contradictions, may variously be enacted, followed, or resisted” (p. 366). Griffin and Pustay (1999) present culture as a collection of values, beliefs, behaviors, habits and attitudes that differentiate societies. Schall (1983) “an organization might then be studied by discovering and synthesizing its rules of social interaction and interpretation, as revealed in the behavior they shape. Social interaction and interpretation are communication activities, so it follows that the culture could be described by articulating communication rules” (p. 560). Hofstede (1984) defines culture as a collective programming of minds that differentiates the members of a human group from another. Meyerson (1991) “Members do not agree upon clear boundaries, cannot identify shared solutions, and do not reconcile contradictory beliefs and multiple identities. Yet, these members contend they belong to a culture. They share a common orientation and overarching purpose, face similar problems, and have comparable experiences. However, these shared orientations and purposes accommodate different beliefs and incommensurable technologies, these problems imply different solutions, and these experiences have multiple meanings... Thus, for at least some cultures, to dismiss the ambiguities in favor of strictly what is clear and shared is to exclude some of the most central aspects of the members’ cultural experience and to ignore the essence of their cultural community” (p.131-132) Feldman (1991) “Culture does not necessarily imply a uniformity of values. Indeed, quite different values may be displayed by people of the same culture. In such an instance, what is it that holds together the members of the organization? I suggest that we look to the existence of a common frame of reference or a shared recognition of relevant issues. There may not be agreement about whether these issues should be relevant or about whether they are positively or negatively value. They may array themselves differently with respect to that issue, but whether positively or negatively, they are all oriented to it” (p. 154). “Culture can be understood as a shared set of attributes of any group, by which this group organizes it’s living together, its environment and its solutions to the questions of the society” (Pathak, 2011, p.5). The attributes in question are often categorized into ten distinct features that are shared by a group and separate them (culturally at least) from other groups (Pathak, 2011). Clearly, there are many aspects of culture that have to be accounted for when working with various cultures. A lack of understanding or conflict between any aspects could prove detrimental. Since there are important differences by which groups and societies organize themselves, in their shared meaning of mortality, and in the ways they interact with their environment understanding, interpreting and incorporating all of these attributes of culture are a must in international business.

But how do these various traits come to be, and why do they differ from that of other groups? Culture is a product of the environment in which a group resides. As human beings have spread throughout the various lands around our world, they have had to “adapt to widely differing conditions and to periodic cataclysmic changes in local and global climate” (Pathak, 2011, p.6). These varying climates and conditions have caused groups to react, adjust and interact differently with their surroundings and thus, the basis for a new culture is born. Although with the world becoming a theoretically smaller place with the advancements of technology, there is a greater integration of cultures, there are still enormous differences that must be taken into account when looking to do business with a culture different than ones own (Ruigrok & Wagner, 2003). And according to Pathak, 2011, “there are ten distinct features in which cultures differ from each other: the national character/basic personality, perception, time concepts, space concepts, thinking, language, non-verbal communication, values, behaviors and social groupings and relationships” (p. 5).

The study will now focus on the attributes of culture and identified by Pathak (2011) and their implication in internationalization.

3. Attributes of culture

3.1. Perception

Perception in culture will encompass many of the following constructs of culture. The perception of time, space, communication, value and behaviors will all be discussed in their dedicated section in the later part of this paper. However, perception can also cover other aspects of culture that must be addressed. When dealing with international business, it must be understood that what works in one country may not work in another. Although there are trends that are almost universal, such as the increasing implementation of technology into our day-to-day lives, this does not mean that all trends span global borders. In essence, the cultures that define different groups also help to shape views, opinions, skepticisms and beliefs. Because of these traits that have been installed in individuals as a result of the environmental surroundings and social interactions of our upbringings, the way in which something as basic as money is perceived varies immensely between cultures.

Religion is a major factor to be considered in internationalization with many cultures regarding religion as the most important aspect of their day-to-day lives. Differences in religious views can lead to conflict, as has been seen through years of wars and attacks. Therefore, religion must be approached in a sensitive manner when dealing in global business. The roles and expectations of males and females can also be perceived differently. Although there is a level of equality among males and females in business in the United States, some cultures are yet to adopt a view of parity. In the Middle East, many cultures will not acknowledge or greet a woman that is accompanying a male. Therefore, if conducting business in the Middle East, this must be dually noted and if a female is the representative of an internationalizing company, it may be best to rethink the approach.

3.2. Time Concepts

Variations in the way time is viewed is a topic that may come as a shock to those that have little or no experience with dealing in foreign countries. The concept of time is a creation that constrains all of humanity. Hall, (1959) stated despite the fact that time itself is unchanging, constant, and ever present, the meaning assigned to it, the way it is used, and the importance placed on it varies widely from culture to culture. Avoiding the fact that time is perceived different from one group to the next could have many negative implications, thus a great deal of research has been produced on the topic of time concepts. The effects of time concepts on internationalization may have huge implications on relationships among business officials if not addressed and understood. In some Asian nations, many employees are required to be at their place of work ahead of their boss because of their lower level of status within the company. However, the manager or person of higher status does not stick to a strict schedule and does not often arrive at the same time everyday. Because they are considered more important than others within the organization, they are given the privilege of arriving late (Du Plessis & Rautenbach, 2010). Although this example of Asian culture shows a somewhat relaxed approach to time, this does not apply to all aspects of their culture. Levine and Wolf (1985) observed clocks from various major cities around the world in order to determine the level of accuracy and thus importance and emphasis that is put on time. Oddly enough, Japanese clocks were found to be the most accurate and Indonesian clocks being the least accurate.

Understanding cross-cultural concepts of time will have a big impact on internationalization. Being able to understand the difference among mono and polychronic cultures is the difference between generating good business relationships and destroying them. These different views will have effects on all aspects of business from “scheduling meeting, participating in conference calls or planning a project” (Cohen, 1993). Failing to adhere to cultural perceptions of time will not only cause intermittent misunderstandings and difficulties, but will lower a subcultures economic power if the concept viewed by the majority is resisted or ignored (Cohen, 1993).

3.3. Space Concepts

Much as the way different cultures perceive time and its value in different way, space (in terms of proximity and location) is also seen to be an aspect of social interaction that can determine whether or not a relationship begins well or falters from the get go (Hall, 1976). As with any type of business, the chances of interacting with business partners, customers, clients and other business people are inevitable. How we interact with these individuals however, may be the difference between generating new business and losing a great opportunity. With this in mind, the first and most important concept when dealing with space is that of personal space (LeBaron, 2003).

The distance in which people stand from one another when engaged in conversation all depends on many cultural factors. The bubble, as it is often called, refers to the area in which each individual considers his or her own. The proximity that is considered acceptable in different cultures is determined via a combination of the relationship with the individual they are conversing, their emotions as well as of course their cultural background (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

The concept of personal space stems back to human’s primal instincts and the innate trait of territory protection. That being said, when dealing with a new culture, it is especially useful to have an understanding of how close to stand to an individual and what not to touch to avoid any unnecessary conflicts, insults or unintentional threatening gestures. People from countries such as the United States and Germany tend to outline distinctive places in which they consider theirs. Therefore, these people do not like to have that area disturbed. If it is an item such as a car, they do not condone touching or access without expressed permission.

The process of internationalization must not only consider the concept of personal space but that of location also. In many western countries, the higher up the hierarchy an individual becomes, the better the location of office within a building is awarded. In the United States, a corner office with many windows is reserved for the higher-level management. However, this is not the case in France where management is often located in the most central position within a building. The perception of many French organizations is that all decisions need to be centralized; therefore, the decision maker is awarded the most central location as to oversee the operations of the company (LeBaron, 2003). It must be considered how a culture perceives space in all aspects. Misinterpreting the value of space cannot only be considered impolite, but may be seen as an attempt to undermine an individual’s power.

3.4. Language and Thinking

It is no secret that different countries often speak different languages and that effective communication requires some sort of synchronization between individual in terms of language, but with over 7000 languages around the globe, this is easier said than done. Often when companies are undertaking the process of internationalization, the very first and the most obvious hurdle that is going to appear is that of a language barrier. A language barrier can be defined as simply as ‘miscommunication’ but has also been said to be “factors preventing or distributing the flow of information between potential or actual suppliers and customers” (Frydrychowska & Li, 2008). The presence of such a barrier cannot only be seen within an organization, but can also cause major problems with communication at all levels of the supply chain.

A company beginning to sell products into a foreign market will have to overcome the language barrier even if they are never to step foot outside of their home borders. Products that are exported to foreign countries will have to include packaging and instructions printed in the correct language (Zander, Mockaitis & Harzing, 2011). Furthermore, communicating with distributors and retail outlets would not be possible without the presence of a shared language. With that being said, using the correct means in which to translate and communicate via a different language is not only a useful task to undertake, but more so a necessary task (Tubert-Oklander, 2011).

The way in which various languages are used can differ dramatically from one language to the next. The use of verbs to mark past, present or future tense can be used completely differently and some languages such as Russian take into account gender, with words pronounced and spelt differently depending on what gender connotation is being used (Butler, 2011). These are just a few examples of differences not only in the language but also of the structure and framework of communication. Because of these differences in how a person constructs a sentence, the meaning and understanding of an event and or text may be perceived in very different ways (Zander, Mockaitis & Harzing, 2011). When attempting to enter the Chinese market, Coke spent a great deal of time and money producing the correct translation of their beverage. Having had tens of thousands of signs manufactured, they discovered that the translation actually said "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax", depending on the dialect" (Butler, 2011).

Success in business relies upon effective communication. The first step to communicating efficiently is being able to use language, both spoken and written to convey messages in their intended form. Without the ability to do this, internationalization would be useless. However, language is not only a means of communication, the effects of language go a lot deeper than what meets the eye. Language will even determine a person's perception of reality and mould one's thoughts and emotions (Butler, 2011).

3.5. Non-Verbal Communication

Dealing with different cultures does not just mean taking into account the most obvious forms of communication such as verbal speech and the language that a certain culture happens to use as its primary form of verbal communication. As important as the words themselves, non-verbal cues may set the tone of a conversation in a way that was not intentional despite the flawless use of the spoken language. As with nonverbal communication, what is considered usual or polite behavior in one culture may be seen as unusual or impolite in another (Levine & Adelman, 1993).

Communicating via gestures is often used to reinforce or support a verbal message (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). However, non-verbal communication is not limited to gestures. How a person dresses, a person's tones of voice or smell are all aspects of non-verbal communication that must be taken into account (Levine & Adelman, 1993).

However, non-verbal communication is typically attributed as having two different levels, written and oral signals. Oral signals include body language, gestures, facial expressions, intensity, pace, tone of voice and posture, whereas written cues "involve stylistic features like headings, titles, subheadings, photographs, captions, figures, graphs, bar charts, etc.," (Ten Bos, 2011). Other non-verbal cues can include humor, proxemics and paralinguistic's.

In order to communicate effectively across cultures, understanding how these subtle differences in non-verbal communication are used can have profound effects upon a relationship (Ten Bos, 2011). Gestures such as facial expressions can be easily interpreted as they are seen to be universal. How cultures greet and gesture to one another can have profoundly different meanings. Beckoning a person to come with the palm of the hand facing upwards, which is acceptable in the United States, would be found to be insulting in Korea or Latin America. In such cultures the use of this gesture would only be used to beckon an animal (Levine & Adelman, 1993). Furthermore, "many American business executives enjoy relaxing with their feet up on their desks. But to show a person from Saudi Arabia or Thailand the sole of one's foot is extremely insulting, because the foot is considered the dirtiest part of the body" (Levine & Adelman, 1993).

How different cultures greet one another is also a consideration for international business people. Shaking hands is the custom in the United States, but this is not used as the standard greeting elsewhere. Many Asian cultures bow when greeting one another, whereas other cultures such as those in the Middle East will kiss one another and some may even hug. However, even the way in which each type of greeting is executed can vary from one culture to the next. Shaking hands in the United States and France is conducted in two entirely different manners with variations in duration and firmness of the gesture being completely different (Willis, Palermo & Burke, 2011). Maintaining eye contact shows a degree of interest or attention when dealing with Western cultures, however to show respect in Japan, Latin America or in many African nations, eye contact should be avoided (Ten Bos, 2011).

Understanding the different meanings of non-verbal cues and communicating effectively not only with a different language but with a new set of gestures can be a great challenge for any business person engaging in business internationally. From the first moment of contact with a potential client, non-verbal cues may well determine the success of the relationship. Knowing whether to shake hands, hug or even kiss may determine the first impression that could last a lifetime. It is vital for all businesses to understand the proper use of non-verbal communication in every culture in which they interact with (Willis, Palermo & Burke, 2011).

3.6. Values, Attitudes, Behavior and Ethics

The way in which people behave, much like other aspects that construct the character of each individual being, is a product of our surrounding and our upbringing. The values and attitudes that have been installed in individuals from the influence of their cultural relatives over the years have played a monumental role in shaping the differentiation in behavioral norms between cultures (Saunders & Wenzel, 2007). As an individual grows and becomes emotionally and intellectually mature, certain cultural rules are learnt in regards to modifying and dealing with various circumstances, as well as judgment of these events (Fisher, Ferreira, Assmar, Redford & Harb., 2005). These rules begin to shape values and attitudes.

Values are a person's opinion and judgment as to what is considered right or wrong, acceptable or not acceptable, important and normal. The values shared by a group of individuals or of a culture go along way in establishing that group's attitudes and behavioral norms (Triandis, 1994). Like values, attitudes are often unconsciously held and may not have a rational basis (Triandis, 1994). Both the values and attitudes go along way in determining how various aspects of conduct should be executed. For example, Western cultures embrace the value of hard work and perseverance and punctuality, however, Bolivian or Jamaican's do not hold the same values, which may be perceived as laziness or lack of motivation to a Westerner.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, internationalization is becoming more common and there will always be cultural differences. Because cultures vary, the impact on internationalization may be acceptable with one culture than another. The company considering internationalization will have to learn the culture of the country it is planning to do business because without that the company can never be successful. It is extremely important that companies both small and large know and understand how differences in culture impact their operations and the ability to do business with other countries. It is also important to note that companies with ethnocentric tendencies will find it more difficult to do business in other countries. To be successful, organizations and its managers must acquire some knowledge about the host country's county culture. This knowledge could about the language, values and even the politics of the host country. This paper indicates that culture does have profound effects on the processes and procedures of companies during internationalization. Although cultural awareness among highly educated and professionally experienced individuals may eliminate the misinterpretations of slight nuances in behavior, values and attitudes, the major aspects of the cultural construct that must be addressed to help the integration of different cultures into international business are that of communication. Language and non-verbal communication produce the two largest constraints to a smooth integration of cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Cultural differences affect the way business is conducted internationally and extra measures have to be taken to ensure that a business experiences success and that globalization opportunities cannot be ignored by companies today.

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