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Bridging the Cultural Gap

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Abstract

The ever-increasing globalization of the workplace, and subsequent geographical dispersion of employees, creates many challenges for today's testers, including communicating across different time zones, overcoming language barriers and maintaining a consistent team framework. One unique challenge that should not be overlooked is that of cultural diversity and the stereotyping that can and does occur. Whether it's Americans working with East Indians, Europeans working with Asians, or even east and west coasters in the United States, there are cultural differences that might result in participants hindering a project inadvertently. Because perceptions affect interactions, the negative results range from simply frustrated communication among team members to delayed projects.

These obstacles need not be a hindrance to the testing process. Learn what the common stereotypes are and how to overcome pre-conceived notions, devise efficient work practices and enjoy the benefits of creating a more cohesive testing team across the globe.

Biography

Katherine Alexander graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology from California State University, Fullerton with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships. She has been working as a Test Engineer since 2006 and is currently employed with Vertex Business Services where she focuses on custom projects, collaborating with the client to discover solutions that meet their business needs. The recent global expansion at Vertex Business Services and the changing demands of her current position has prompted a renewed interest in her previous studies and research.

Introduction

Globalization in the workplace and geographically-dispersed teams are here to stay. There are benefits to the global office – employees can work from anywhere at any time which aids in continuing iterative development and testing on a project. People can be hired based on their competencies, not just their physical location, enabling managers to build teams with higher skills.

There are also challenges to having team members spread across the globe. Differing time zones can make communication difficult. Email is an effective form of communication but sometimes a phone call can resolve a problem more quickly. Language barriers can also present difficulties. Probably the greatest challenge is that of cultural diversity. Each culture has its own social norms and customs that dictate how the individuals in that culture approach their work and their coworkers. It is important not

to overlook this aspect or fall into the trap of stereotyping certain behaviors; instead, it is important to understand these behaviors and be better able to communicate with all members on the testing team. Delivering the best quality products in the most efficient timeframe is the central goal of all team members, and basic cultural literacy can better equip the team to accomplish its goal effectively.

What is Culture?

We first need to understand culture and why it varies so much among groups of people.

There are three layers of culture (O'Neil, 2006). The first layer is the body of cultural traditions that distinguish a specific society. This includes shared language, traditions and beliefs that set these people apart from others. This is what we generally refer to when speaking about Italian, Japanese or Indian cultures.

The second layer is what is known as a subculture. In complex, diverse societies in which people have come from many different parts of the world they often retain much of their original cultural traditions, sharing a common identity, food tradition, dialect or language that sets them apart from the rest of their society. Examples of easily-identifiable subcultures in the United States include ethnic groups such as Vietnamese Americans, African Americans and Mexican Americans.

The third layer consists of cultural universals: learned behavior patterns that are shared by all of humanity. No matter where people live in the world, they share these universal traits. Examples of these traits include distinguishing between good and bad behavior, using verbal language with a limited set of sounds and grammatical rules, raising children in some sort of family setting and establishing leadership roles for making community decisions.

All cultures exhibit these traits but have developed their own specific ways of carrying them out. For example, people in deaf subcultures use their hands to communicate with sign language instead of verbal language. However, sign languages use grammatical rules the same as verbal languages.

Let's look at an example of why it is so critical to understand other cultures that are working together. When negotiating in Western countries, the objective is to work toward a target of mutual understanding and to "shake hands" when an agreement is reached. This is the cultural sign that negotiations have ended and working together can begin. In Middle Eastern countries, shaking hands is a pre-cursor to negotiations: this is not the sign that the deal is complete, but that serious negotiations are just beginning (Itim, 2009).

In testing, it is important that all team members understand the requirements and test plan of a project and that this is communicated clearly between the tester and the developer at the outset of a project rather than halfway through. This will avoid any delivery delays or out-of-scope issues.

Cultural Dimensions

Dr. Geert Hofstede conducted what is probably the most comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture (Roberts, 2008) and his results have become the international standard by which to implement global Human Resources policies (Higgs, 2005).

Beginning in the 1970's, while working at IBM as a psychologist, Hofstede collected and analyzed data from over 100,000 individuals in over 40 countries. His research was done on IBM employees only, which allowed him to attribute the patterns to national differences in culture rather than differences in company culture. From these findings, he initially identified four distinct cultural dimensions that served to distinguish one culture from another (Mind Tools, 2010). He later added a fifth dimension which is how the model is presented today.

The five dimensions are:

1. Power Distance

Power Distance Index (PDI) focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, which exists and is accepted between people in a country's society. A higher score indicates that society accepts an unequal distribution of power and people understand their place in the system. These societies are more likely to follow a caste system that does not allow significant mobility of its citizens. A low power index indicates that power is shared and well-dispersed, that society members view themselves as equals.

Characteristics of a high PDI are centralized companies, with strong hierarchies and large gaps in compensation, authority and respect. The leader's power is acknowledged and answers come from the top. A low PDI is characterized by flatter organizations where supervisors and employees are considered almost as equals. Teamwork is relied upon and many people are involved in decision making.

In a country with a high PDI, such as Malaysia, one would probably send reports only to top management and have closed door meetings where only a select few, powerful leaders were in attendance.

2. Individualism

Individualism (IDV) relates to the degree the society reinforces individual achievement and interpersonal relationships. A high IDV ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. There is a loose connection between people. A low IDV ranking demonstrates societies with a more collective nature and close ties between individuals. These cultures reinforce extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for the group.

High IDV is characterized by high valuation on people's time and their need for freedom, an enjoyment of challenges and an expectation of rewards for hard work, a respect for privacy and an encouragement of debate and expression of individual ideas. Characteristics of low IDV scores are: an emphasis on building skills and becoming master of something, harmony is more important than honesty, respect is shown for age and/or wisdom and change is introduced slowly.

In applying Hofstede's analysis, we understand that, in Central American countries like Panama where the IDV scores are very low, a marketing campaign that emphasizes benefits to the community or that is tied into a popular political movement would likely be understood and well-received.

3. Masculinity

Masculinity (MAS) refers to the degree the society reinforces the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control and power. A high MAS indicates the country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation. In these cultures, males dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure, with females being controlled by male domination. A low MAS ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.

High MAS scores are characterized by men being masculine and women being feminine, a well-defined distinction between men's work and women's work. Men are advised to avoid discussing emotions or making emotionally-based decisions or arguments. In low MAS societies, powerful women are admired and respected, there is an effort to ensure job design and practices are not discriminatory to either gender and men and women are treated equally.

According to Hofstede's rating, Japan is highly masculine while Sweden has the lowest measured value. A testing team in Japan would have greater success with a male employee appointed to lead the team and a strong male contingent on the team. A Swedish testing team would aim for a balance of skills rather than gender.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society, the level of anxiety members feel when in uncertain or unknown situations. A high UAI scoring nation has a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. In low UAI scoring countries, there is less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and more tolerance for a variety of opinions. This is reflected in a society that is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change and takes more and greater risks.

Low AUI scoring cultures are characterized by very formal business conduct with many rules and policies, a need for and expectation of structure and avoidance of differences. A sense of nervousness spurns high levels of emotion and expression. Characteristics of low AUI scoring countries are: an informal business attitude, a greater concern with long-term strategy than what happens on a daily basis, an acceptance of change and risk, and an expression of curiosity when differences are discovered.

Argentina has a high UAI, so it would be better to investigate the various options of a project, present a limited number of choices, but maintain very detailed information on contingency and risk plans.

5. Long Term Orientation

Long Term Orientation (LTO) describes the degree to which a society embraces long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values. High LTO scores indicate the country prescribes to the values of long-term commitments and respect for tradition. Delivering on social obligations and “saving face” is considered very important. A low LTO ranking indicates the country does not reinforce the concept of long-term, traditional orientation. Instead, change occurs more rapidly as long-term traditions and commitments do not become impediments to change.

Characteristics of a high LTO are a strong work ethic, parents and men have more authority than young people and women, there is a high value placed on education and training and perseverance, loyalty and commitment are rewarded. In contrast, the characteristics of a low LTO are promotion of equality, high creativity and individualism, self-actualization is sought and there is no hesitation to introduce necessary changes.

People in the United States and United Kingdom have low LTO scores. This suggests that almost anything can be expected from these cultures in terms of creative expression and new ideas. Tradition is not as valued as in other countries so people in these societies are likely willing to help execute the most innovative plans as long as they can participate fully.

Benefits of Hofstede’s Work

Often businesses and even testing teams see cultural diversity as an area of difficulty and obstacle rather than an opportunity to build a competitive advantage. Laurent and Adler (1983) carried out an exercise that illustrates this point well. International executives attending management seminars in France were asked to list the advantages of cultural diversity for their organizations. 100% of participants were able to identify disadvantages while less than 30% could identify any advantage.

A common, stereotypical fear regarding globalization is that another country will “steal” our jobs from under us. However, when examining data on changes in the U.S. work force, Greenwald and Kahn (2008) show that this isn’t the case, that job losses due to higher productivity, often the result of improving technology, greatly outnumber those lost to globalization. In fact, the U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that 65% of job losses in manufacturing between 2000 and 2006 were due to productivity increases while just 35% of job losses owed to overseas outsourcing. It can be assumed that those in the software industry hold the same types of fears and misconceptions.

This preconceived notion is most probably caused by the lack of understanding we generally have about other cultures. That which is not easily understood or familiar can become a roadblock. Hofstede’s work removes these roadblocks and provides a starting point for conversation between different groups. He has provided scores for 57 countries that depict the dimension scores for that country and culture with an explanation of how they uniquely apply to that country (geert-hofstede.com, 2009). These scores provide a guide for how to approach a different culture.

For instance, when working with a low PD scoring culture, acknowledge a leader’s power. This will be the person to go to when decisions are needed on testing procedures. When differences are being discussed with a high LTO culture, show respect for traditions and avoid doing anything that would cause another to “lose face”.

Criticisms of Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

As useful as Hofstede’s Model of Cultural Dimensions can be, there are a few drawbacks that one should keep in mind (ClearlyCultural.com, 2009).

First, the whole averages of a country do not equal the individuals of that country. Hofstede’s model has proven to be quite accurate when applied to the general population, but it should be remembered that not all individuals or even regions within subcultures fit the description. There are always exceptions to the rule, so use the model as a guide to understanding differences rather than a law set in stone.

Second, there is a question of how accurate Hofstede’s data is. It was collected through questionnaires, which have their own set of limitations. In addition, the context in which a question is asked in some cultures is different from its content. Especially in group-oriented cultures, individuals tend to answer questions as if they were addressed to the group the individual belongs to rather than the individual herself.

Last, how up-to-date is the data? Hofstede’s research was conducted in the 1970’s. How much have some of the cultures studied changed since then? How much impact has technology had in recent years? Technology has brought the world much closer together over the last decade and different cultures have found themselves working together and communicating more since Hofstede’s

differences were established. Furthermore, cultures are becoming mixed through foreign studies, immigration and foreign postings. It is quite common these days to meet an Indian who behaves very American because he has spent so many years studying in the United States.

Additional Steps to Bridge the Gap

Recognizing that cultural differences exist and respecting traditions is a good start to bridging the cultural gap in the workplace. There are several other simple activities that testing teams and team leaders can implement to make communication easier and more effective, and to build a more cohesive team overall.

As previously mentioned, language barriers can and do impede communication. In the United States, the majority of workers speak English, which is one of the hardest languages to learn. There are many words that are spelled the same but have different pronunciations and different meanings. Americans tend to use a lot of slang, which is confusing to non-English speaking people. Avoid the use of slang when communicating with different cultures. Use e-mail when appropriate, as written communication removes accents that might be difficult to understand and gives the author and reader the ability to re-read the text, to gain a better understanding of what is trying to be communicated.

In addition, speak slowly and clearly. Even when rushed for time, don't rush through communication. It is better to take the time than risk miscommunication that results in additional time to clear up the confusion. Ask for clarification and don't assume understanding of what has been said. Frequently check for understanding and rephrase what has been said when necessary (Culturocity.com, 2007).

When possible, it is very helpful and beneficial to send team leaders to visit the corresponding locations. This allows a brief immersion in the culture that can provide a greater understanding of customs and behaviors. Each culture is able to teach the other about itself and the in-person meeting provides the type of bonding that isn't available to groups working at great geographical distances, thus enforcing the idea of team and the formation of a group with the same purpose (Outsourcing Factory Incorporated, 2008).

One of the most popular processes used in testing today is the Agile process which is very conducive to working within geographically-dispersed teams. Especially between different time zones, iterative development allows testers to work on each piece as it's developed and allows quick turnover in solving issues found. It also provides frequent checks that testing is proceeding as according to plan and minimizes risks. The frequent communication needed provides more contact and a better understanding of the process between differing cultures, thus building a base for future projects (CyberMedia, 2010).

Closing the Gap

Being a software tester in today's globalized marketplace requires an increasingly-high level of interpersonal skill and cultural savvy. With the proper training of team members and the recognition of the differences that exist between cultures, globalization can enhance the testing process. Each individual brings unique experiences, knowledge and ideas to the group which can have a positive impact and contribute to the success of testing projects. Great success can be achieved by being aware of the cultural gap. Even greater success can be achieved by putting in the time and inter-personal research necessary to bridge it.