Identifying Cross-Cultural Communication Barriers on Global IT Rollout Projects

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Abstract

Numerous studies have been undertaken to investigate the issues long-term expatriates and global leaders managing multicultural teams encounter. However, there has been little research to date on cross-cultural communication challenges in project management, and this is particularly the case where the IT sector and rollout projects are concerned.

Our research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication on IT-related projects by identifying key challenging factors encountered by research participants. The purposive sampling criteria included "multiple years of experience in global IT rollout projects" and "working in multiple countries, including other continents as well". These criteria stipulated that participants possess a specific kind of experience in multicultural social contexts, based on which we interviewed ten experts. These global professionals come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and have each worked in three to twelve countries (8.4 on average).

An interpretative phenomenological approach was applied, in which the interpretation of participants' lived experiences was linked to relevant literature: cross-cultural communication and cultural profiles, organisational and national culture models, and cross-cultural project management. Our findings revealed six significant areas that have emerged as key sources of intercultural problems on ERP related IT rollout projects: language, hidden assumptions, work-life balance, confrontation, time management, and apparent lies.

The implications and value of our study derive from the lessons learned by the interviewed experts as they are recognised as individuals with valuable information and abilities – developed through significant international experience – that may inform the practice of other project managers similarly working for multinational IT organisations.

Keywords

cross-cultural communication, multicultural team management, project management, IT

1 Introduction

Investigating risks, methods, techniques, tools and the role of leadership styles and organisational cultures in project management and their impact on project success is a well-developed research field (Kendra and Taplin, 2004; Répáczki and Juhász, 2010; Sebestyén and Tóth, 2014; Doskočil, 2016). Specific aspects of team communication, as well as recording team performance differences based on communication competences have also received a lot of attention from researchers (Soós and Juhász, 2010; Karácsony and Bokor, 2021).

In recent decades, globalisation has led to the development of multicultural teams and the expansion of available studies related to the field. Researchers have confirmed the benefits of having multicultural teams, as such teams are perceived to outperform monocultural ones

(Earley and Mosakowsky, 2000). Most research focuses on the issues faced by expatriates and global leaders who manage multicultural teams on a long-term basis; however, there has been little research into cross-cultural communication challenges in project management, especially in relation to the IT sector (Kendra and Taplin, 2004). The growth in the number of multinational corporations (MNCs), driven by international mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity, has increased the development and implementation of IT solutions globally. Such solutions are generally mandated by headquarters (HQ) to be implemented in subsidiaries, often in emerging economies.

Schein (1996) argues that a majority of change programmes fail due to the multiple cultures of organisations and the lack of harmony among them when implementing the stipulated changes or adopting new work methods.

Meanwhile, cross-cultural adjustment has an important effect on an organisation's productivity and international competitiveness if its employees work in multicultural teams or in foreign locations (Jurásek and Wawrosz, 2023). Beamish (2013) also pointed out the challenges faced by expatriates from industrialised countries with relations to host country nationals from emerging countries. Leung and Morris (2014) found that "Western employees may view their Chinese bosses as high in position power, but low in expert power…(which) may handicap their legitimacy as effective leaders." Such hidden cultural assumptions can lead to expensive delays or in some cases to deadlocks (Kendra and Taplin, 2004; Wang and Liu, 2007). Still, today, global IT companies often consider the need of developing cross-cultural management within their organisation as being of only peripheral importance in relation to effective international project management. This may be especially true for the IT sector, as this sector is generally driven by standardised procedures and processes implying standard execution. Our study explores the relevance and efficiency of cross-cultural communication in ERP related IT rollout projects with the aim of identifying key issues experienced by research participants.

1.1 ERP rollout projects

The relationship between the elements that make up the processes associated with international construction management depends on client requirements and the chosen procurement approach for project delivery, emphasising the importance of the use of appropriate systems and organisation structures (Mawhinney, 2001). Key to this is integration; the capabilities of such systems can be best exploited when multiple modules are in use, hence, companies typically opt for medium- to large-scale system implementations. Besides integrating the different functions of a company, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems also integrate its different subsidiaries to a certain extent, through offering a platform for using the same, well-designed, standardised business processes. Standardisation is crucial to the process, as well as operations management so as to reduce costly variation (Slack and Brandon-Jones, 2018). These systems offer a wide range of customisation options, which clients may use with their business processes in nearly every industry. Despite the flexibility it affords, an ERP system can rarely be used optimally without adjusting it to the business processes.

Consequently, the first step of an ERP system implementation is to figure out a solution that supports the company's possibly redesigned processes in an optimal way. Once the solution has been proven through a pilot project at a chosen site, it can be systematically deployed to further locations. This deployment process is called the "Rollout", a term which may be applied to an entire system, but also to a module or to a certain business process. The result of the pilot project is the "Template", which aims to cover all the related standardised processes and to consider possible local specialties in advance, to make the rollout a low-cost, negotiations-free, nearly automated process.

As the rollout is a joint venture of the global IT and the local business colleagues, the project team is assembled accordingly, with members delegated from both sides. The project is run by an IT project manager working closely with the affected members of the local management team, who are often the process owners as well. ERP rollout projects bear multiple challenges encoded in their nature. The previously described projects are mostly Iron Triangle projects, which means that time, scope, and cost need to be kept in balance. Scope includes the functionality and features the timeframe is the planned length of the project, and estimated resources are costs and human capacity. A change to one constraint means that the other two will need to be adjusted accordingly, otherwise quality will suffer (Atkinson, 1999). Our assumption is that culture is an amplifier factor that needs to be considered by international project managers aiming to achieve the right balance among the triple constraints of the Iron Triangle.

2 Related literature
2.1 Cross-cultural communication and cultural profiles

Intercultural communication has been defined as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviour that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (Chen and Starosta, 1999).

Cultures manifest at three levels: the level of deep assumptions that are the essence of the culture, the level of values (reflecting what a group wishes ideally to be) and day-to-day behaviour (representing a complex compromise among the values, the assumptions, and the requirements of the situation (Schein, 1996).

Hall (1966, 1976) established the conceptual foundation for differences in communication between cultures. Hall (1966) suggests that communication varies according to the level of which speakers rely on factors other than explicit verbal messaging in conveying their communication leading to two main categories: low-context and high

context cultures. High context cultures tend to "read the air" by searching for information in the surrounding context of words such as body language, gestures and tone of voice, which is more characteristic of collectivistic cultures, e.g. Asian, Arabic and Latin American countries (Hall and Hall, 1990). Lustig and Koester (2006) noted that different social contexts create extremely different rules for appropriate use of non-verbal behaviour. Incomprehension of such contexts may lead to serious business conflicts and misunderstandings. Low context cultures communicate by using verbal messaging, perceiving it to be a complete means of transferring information. This communication style is more likely used in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (House et al., 2004; Hofstede, 2001). A common language may be considered as a sufficient tool to share necessary information, but even within low context cultures it may lead to miscommunication due to differences in how the language itself is decoded, which may result in escalating conflicts (Hall and Hall, 1990). Since Hall's study there is a growing body of research demonstrating that culture plays a significant role in successful negotiations, conflict management and multicultural team management (e.g. Drake, 1995, 2001; Brett, 2007; Schoen, 2022).

The test of the applied and anthropological linguist Richard D. Lewis (2006) offers a chance for individuals to determine their own cultural profiles to better suit them to career opportunities in the world. The Lewis model approaches difficulties in cross-cultural communication considering "the interlocking nature of our own language and thought". Just as Bernard Shaw once noted: "Britain and America are two nations divided by a common language", Lewis points out that manners and customs may be acquired, but our language will play the role of a "dominating and pervasive conditioner" in the way we form our thoughts and respond to situations, creating powerful mental blocks. His model encompasses the following three categories of cultural profiles of individuals: linear-active, multi-active, reactive cultures (LMR). The common traits of linear-active people – e.g., German, Nordic people – are punctuality, methodological planning, doing one thing at a time, low-context communication, and unemotional behaviour. Multi-actives (e.g., Latin-American, Italian) are people-oriented, emotional, disregard time, and make heavy use of body-language. Reactive cultures, such as Japan, are relationship oriented, use silence, are polite, avoid losing face at all costs and communicate in a high context manner. The first two types of culture prefer to approach communication as a dialogue, while reactive people prefer monologue-pause-reflection-monologue. Being aware of different cultural profiles may foster higher mutual benefits in international negotiations.

2.2 Organizational and national culture models

Successful cross-cultural management necessitates a high level of intercultural communication and competency (Jurásek and Wawrosz, 2023). Several models have been developed by aiming to provide a framework for understanding cultural differences. Cross-cultural management research mainly bases its conceptual approach on three cultural reference models, Hofstede (1984, 2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) and the Globe Studies (House et al., 2004).

Kluckhohn and Stodtbeck's (1961) framework, which indicated five aspects that lead to values espoused by society, was heavily utilised in the models cited above. In their paper the authors suggested that the fundamental orientation of a society is based on how it goes about solving problems, an approach which ultimately gives rise to the definition of its values. The five fundamental issues and value orientations were connected to time, humanity and its natural surroundings, relating to others, motivating behaviour, and human nature.

Hofstede's (1984, 2001) ground-breaking work on comparative leadership meanwhile drew attention to applicable findings in global management and leadership. Initially the four dimensions identified were: Power Distance, Collectivism versus Individualism, Femininity versus Masculinity and Uncertainty Avoidance later elaborated by Long-term versus Short-term orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov and Hofstede, 2012). Despite facing numerous criticisms, Hofstede's ground-breaking work underscored the significance of comparative studies of cross-cultural management practices. His findings challenged the notion that core cultural orientations are universally manifested (as had often previously been asserted by cultural anthropologists), demonstrating instead that their expression varies across cultures. For instance, the different interpretation of power distance by individuals from collectivist and individualist cultures may cause dissatisfaction when two such parties interact.

Other scholars have also proposed cultural models with a view to extending mechanisms for cross-cultural communication in the business world. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) designed a Value Questionnaire to investigate cultural diversity in business. The authors identified seven dimensions: universalism vs. particularism,

individualism vs. collectivism, affectivity vs. neutrality, specificity vs. diffuseness, achievement vs. ascription, sequential vs. synchronic and internal vs. external direction. Some of these dimensions overlap with the findings of Kluckhohn and Stodtbeck (1961) but in this case, they focus more on the leadership and management aspects. The question of power distance emerges within the question of to what extent private and work life are separated, and the relation to "truth" is highlighted in the dilemma as to whether prioritising human relationships or following the rules is more important within a particular culture. The awareness of such differences may enable a global manager to "better understand the emergence of 'negotiated cultures' created by managers and subordinates in the multicultural contexts of multinational subsidiary operations and in multinational M&As" (Bird and Mendenhall, 2016). Negotiating a common business culture implies that participants in such a dialogue are aware of cultural differences and how it affects their business culture.

The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) project commenced in 1995 and is today the most comprehensive study of cultural values and leadership across 62 countries. The project integrated existing cultural models, especially Hofstede's cultural model. The Globe Study identified nine cultural dimensions: Assertiveness, Future orientation, Performance orientation, Gender Egalitarianism, In-Group Collectivism, Institutional Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Humane Orientation (House et al., 2004). The Globe dimensions have been used in multiple studies since then (e.g. Maseland and van Hoorn, 2009; Pagda et al., 2021).

These abovementioned cultural models have many similarities. Kluckhohn and Stodtbeck's (1961) framework was clearly the origin of the subsequent frameworks. The GLOBE study extended Hofstede's study by adding three new dimensions: assertiveness, human orientation, and performance orientation. In the GLOBE framework, individualism-collectivism is divided into two variables: in-group collectivism and institutional collectivism.

Comparison of Hofstede's, Trompenaars' and Globe's models became the focus of some researchers (e.g. Magnusson et al., 2008; McSweeney, 2015; Tocar, 2019); for example, McSweeney calls them "A Trio". Tocar (2019) observed the dimensions by employing a content analysis approach and found that Globe is conceptually closer to Hofstede's framework than Tromenaars's. Magnusson et al. (2008) meanwhile found that the cultural

distance constructs based on Hofstede and Trompenaars have strong convergent validity.

Erin Meyer (2014) has more recently developed a more practical approach, implementing an eight-scale model that integrates the results of earlier studies and builds further on this based on business cases. Some of Erin Meyer's dimensions are based on Hall's framework, for example high and low context cultures, and time orientation approaches are similar. The eight scales represent a key area that managers need to be aware of if they wish to be able to decode the possible influence of culture in a given business situation. The eight scales include communicating: low or high context; evaluating: considering the way of giving direct negative feedback; persuading: principles first or applications first; leading: how strong is hierarchy within the culture; directly linked to deciding: whether its top-down or consensual; trusting means task-based or relationship-based orientation; disagreeing covers the level of confrontation; and scheduling time.

2.3 Cross-cultural project management
Each of these studies and models yields a perspective on how global leadership scholars view effective intercultural communication and strives to generate awareness among companies of the importance of regarding intercultural communication as a competence for effective business communication, as well as the necessity for cultural intelligence and a global mindset (Story et al., 2014; Andresen and Bergdolt, 2017; Jurásek and Wawrosz, 2023).

Coinciding with the rise of global companies, cross-cultural management issues have surfaced and led to a rising number of related research studies based initially on cultural anthropological theories. Some decades ago, knowledge transfer was perceived to be mostly uni-directional from headquarters to subsidiaries, and from home country to host country. Research mostly focused on how expatriates could better integrate into the host culture, but no attention was directed at how local managers could adjust to the expatriates' culture (Bird and Mendenhall, 2016; Furnham, 2020).

However, studies around the beginning of the century began to explore general problems of managing diversity in global teams and changes in the nature of project teamwork due to globalisation (Iles and Kaur Hayers, 1997; Dalton et al., 2002; Hinds and Bailey, 2003; Wang and Liu, 2007).

Wang and Liu's (2007) empirical study focused on how to reshape project management practices to fit Chinese culture and found that Chinese traditional values/beliefs

of Strong Hierarchy, Family Consciousness, and Boss Orientation are empirically shown to be major cultural barriers, and the Doctrine of the Mean (harmony is "most precious" in relationships) is not.

Later, a few studies started to focus on discovering what experienced project leaders perceive to be the main challenges regarding managing international teams (Oertig and Buergi, 2006; Liu and Lee, 2008; Glinkowska, 2016; Yu et al., 2021). Oertig and Buergi (2006) revealed several challenges reported by project leaders of cross-cultural or virtual project teams in a matrix organisation: the challenge of leadership, managing virtual aspects of communication and developing trust. Sub-themes identified were managing task, managing people, managing language, cultural issues and managing the matrix. Glinkowska (2016) identified stereotypes, prejudices, ethnocentrism, favouritism, and language as possible barriers to successful multicultural team management.

A small number of studies have meanwhile concentrated on global IT project success factors (Iriarte and Bayona, 2020; Berg and Ritschel, 2023), and some of these have taken the cultural context into particular consideration (e.g. Kendra and Taplin, 2004; Isern, 2014, 2015; Amster and Böhm, 2022).

In their recent literature review, Iriarte and Bayona (2020) explored IT projects' success factors, finding reinforcing evidence of the relevance of soft skills in IT project teams. The most referenced critical factors among soft attributes in literature were involvement, support, communication, and commitment.

In an earlier study, Kendra and Taplin (2004) examined the adoption of Project Management (PM) practices in the IT division of a large manufacturing company and concluded that IT organisations must develop a project management culture based on the shared cultural values of the organisation's members.

Amster and Böhm (2022) studied how Indian project managers perceived the behaviour of their global counterparts on international IT projects. 127 culture-based behaviours, which were further categorised into 19 clusters, were identified as significantly affecting project success and cross-cultural cooperation. These behaviours have an impact on personal relationships, business communication, how everyday work is completed, engagement relationships, and long-term business relationships.

In project management, it may be viewed as obvious that confrontation or scheduling are impactful factors, since the incorrect execution of tasks causes delays which in turn increase costs. However, inappropriate cultural assumptions (Schein, 1996) can also impede successful project execution globally. Our research therefore focused on obtaining an in-depth understanding of the recurring themes of cross-cultural communication on global IT rollout projects, with a view to identifying the most important areas where challenges arise.

Hidden cultural barriers have been researched related to project management (e.g. Wang and Liu, 2007), but surprisingly have still not been considered on many global projects, especially in the IT sector. When measuring effectiveness, efficiency and performance related to a project (Hubert et al., 2012), intercultural aspects are often neglected. Our research question was therefore formulated thus:
RQ: What are the key cross cultural communication barrier factors that long-term expatriates and global leaders face on a global IT rollout project?

3 Methodology
The study applied an interpretative phenomenological approach to understand the complex issue of underlying cross-cultural challenges in global IT rollout projects.

Results of a phenomenological enquiry should be a direct description of the experience without taking its psychological origin into account (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), providing reflection rather on the conscious experience than subconscious motivation (Jopling, 1996). For this study, the interpretation of the lived experience of participants was constantly linked to the relevant key literature: 1. cross-cultural communication and cultural profiles, 2. organisational and national culture models, and 3. cross-cultural project management. This hermeneutic logic enables the constant comparative method – which is required by a phenomenological approach – to identify key thematic issues that are formed based on the narratives of participants related to cultural challenges they have encountered in their work experience. Boyd (2001) suggests 2–10 participants as sufficient to reach saturation, and so does Creswell (1998) by recommending that researchers "long interview up to 10 people". Thompson in his article (1996), which is referred as a reference point of phenomenology in the field of marketing (Goulding, 2004); had a sample of 7 participants. McCracken (2000) also supports the validity of small samples in phenomenological approach: "The purpose of qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share certain characteristics. It is instead to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one

construes the world…". Our purposive sampling criteria included "multiple years of experience in global IT rollout projects" and "working in multiple countries, including other continents as well". These criteria specified a particular level of experience in multicultural social contexts, based on which ten individuals were selected.

Face-to-face interviews occurred in an informal setting to ensure a relaxed atmosphere on site in the participants' countries. Interviews lasted from 60–90 minutes and were recorded for further interpretative purposes. Participants were assured of full anonymity and names have been changed for citations. All interviews were conducted by the researcher following the process outlined by phenomenological interviewing (Thompson et al., 1990). Participants were informed in advance about the topic of the interview, but interview questions were mostly formulated as each participant described their experiences. Thus, the flow of the interview was largely set by the interviewee, who was further encouraged by questions seeking clarifications or additional elaboration of the experience.

The interpretation proceeded by the iterative process of reading through the narratives and identifying key phrases followed by attempts in formulating significant reappearing themes among all texts. During the systematic and recurring iterative process, derived themes were linked to existing literature (Belk and Coon, 1993), thereby providing a thematic structure yielding a rich description of the central aspects of cross-cultural communication issues present in the participants' everyday working life when managing global IT projects.

Although it served primarily as exploratory research, the interpretative phenomenological methodology adopted here enabled the identification of several main themes that suggest a conceptual approach to understanding the impact of hidden cultural barriers on global IT rollouts.

Table 1 outlines the interviewee's name (pseudonym), gender, age, nationality, position, and the list of countries they have had work experience in.

4 Results

The surfacing of serious communication issues on global ERP rollout projects might appear surprising at first glance. The business language of a global company is expected to be the same around the world, especially when IT projects are taken into consideration. As the entire implementation process has already been proven during the pilot project, one might be inclined to assume that appointing experienced businesspeople to the project with adequate language

Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Countries of experience	Position
Amit	Male	33	Indian	12: Belgium, China, Denmark, India, Italy, Morocco, Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, USA, South-Africa, Thailand	Consultant
Carlo	Male	37	Philippine	7: Belgium, China, India, Denmark, Philippines, Thailand, USA	Consultant / Project Manager
Ethan	Male	35	Malaysian	7: Denmark, Germany, India, Malaysia, Philippines, UK, USA	Consultant
Irdina	Female	43	Malaysian	9: China, France, USA, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore	Consultant
Jonas	Male	55	Danish	5: Denmark, Netherlands, India, Germany, Malaysia	Project Manager
Kyle	Male	42	Welsh	12: Russia, Canada, Denmark, England, Germany, India, Mexico, Italy, Spain, Poland, Malaysia, Singapore	Project Manager
Riccardo	Male	48	Italian	10: France, Germany, China, Malaysia, Denmark, Spain, India, Croatia, Italy, Hungary	Consultant
Ryan	Male	36	Philippine	12: Canada, China, UEA, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, India, Japan, Malaysia, Romania	Consultant
Shyam	Male	43	Indian	3: Australia, Malaysia, Philippines	Consultant
Yasmin	Female	37	Malaysian	7: China, Malaysia, Germany, UK, India, Netherlands, Singapore	Project Manager

skills would eliminate miscommunication. Actual experience with such projects indicates otherwise, a fact which motivated our experiential research, which aimed to investigate the root causes of expensive, delayed and, moreover, stressful projects. Our research results identified six interrelated themes that emerged from the lived experiences of our participants. All these themes relate to language and listening habits; hidden assumptions; work-life balance; confrontation; time management and apparent lies.

4.1 Theme 1: Language and listening habits

The linguist Richard Lewis (2006) explained that pronouncing the same words does not necessarily mean sharing the same thoughts between different nationals. "Most of us conduct an interior monologue, often accompanied by visual imagery. ... We can assume that German, Italian, and Malaysian businesspeople do the same thing in their own language. When each speaks, we merely glimpse the tip of a huge iceberg of verbal activity that never breaks the surface of audibility. If you make this reasonable assumption, then you can presume that whatever is said to you will be a brief projection of the inner world of the other person's thoughts. What is said … will be coloured by the person's view of reality, which is itself influenced by the rigidity of his or her own language structure." (Lewis, 2006)

The speed and tools of a given language, the inner world in our mind integrates the intended message into a context. When the context of the speaker and the context of the listener are different then the message may be misinterpreted in an unnoticed way. Such contextual differences are prone to occur on global ERP rollout projects not only as business meets IT, but multiple cultures are involved in this exchange of information.

The difference lies not only in the verbal communication, but also within the listening habits. According to Lewis, for effective communication the listening habits of the audience are just as important as the communicative skills of the speaker. This point is also supported by the consultants in our sample who complained about the skills of their business colleagues.

"I already showed him twice, but he still does not know how to do it." [Jonas, Danish, age 55]
"They do not seem to understand even the simplest things." [Kyle, Welsh, age 42]

The obvious explanation would be to associate these incidents to shortcomings in language skills, but the crux of issue actually lies within the cultural aspect. Reactive

cultures of Lewis (2006) with their circular perception of time expect a different approach than multi-active or linear active cultures. They expect to discuss every topic multiple times, first focusing on the big picture, then going deeper and deeper into the details by each additional round. A recurring pattern of respondents was the complaints about communicating with Thai and Chinese businesspeople.

"Thai people are very approachable, they are very friendly. Everything seems to be very good during a presentation or during giving the training, but they might not understand the things, or they catch the wrong message. For example, I showed the process to the Thai user step by step, he wrote it down, but after that he still did it wrong. I had to explain it again and again, in the end I asked his manager to explain it to him." [Irdina, Malaysian, age 43]
"China is a good example for communication difficulties, you have to double the time booked for a meeting when you speak with them. You have to be slow, and your face has to be slow, as well. Also, sometimes verbal communication is not enough to convey your message, you need to show some gestures and use sign language to make them understand." [Carlo, Philippine, age 37]

These communication difficulties are usually attributed in many cases solely to the language barrier, even if participants speak good English. By complaining about the poor language skills of the process owner instead of applying an appropriate teaching method, the consultant might end up delaying the project. This is not only stressful for all concerned, but – as the Iron Triangle makes plain – it brings cost- and resource- related changes to the project as well. The below example of an exchange between an Italian consultant and his Dutch boss also highlights important differences in listening/learning habits.

"I thought that he was crazy when I met this consultant the first time. I do not think I was prepared enough; our first discussion was like a hurricane coming and destroying everything. I was aware of how such systems work; I studied about it in school, and worked with them before, but hearing it from him was confusing for me. The way he explains is very synthetic, it contains all information that is required to understand, but you need to know his context, the way he thinks. After working together for years, I can understand him easily." [Riccardo, Italian, age 48]

"Understanding the responsibilities behind the roles is different from country to country. It is very different when you present a role description to a Malaysian or to a German businessperson. The Germans like it, because they know exactly what to do, but the Asians cannot understand from the description what they are expected to do. The role description for them is not enough; they need much more details, much more hands-on guidance, working together is the clue." [Jonas, Danish, age 55]

Hidden culture becomes evident when consultants tailor their training to the local culture. When they give enough time to the "cycles of understanding" of their reactive interlocutor or when they support their words with tangible examples or illustrations, then the message will be conveyed.

"In China it was difficult to discuss topics. For example, my process owner would understand, but I had to make sure that I slow down. I had to slow down, pause more, and make sure to use more pictures. I used the flipchart and the whiteboard more than usual. That helped them to understand what I was saying." [Amit, Indian, age 33]

Lewis's model explains the above examples; reactive cultures prefer learning by doing and due to their listening habits, the same topic must be reiterated multiple times. They are not used to take in an extensive amount of information at once, but they will rather settle it in over a longer period via repeated discussions. Other challenges may rise with more rhetorically oriented nations.

"When I had a project in France, it was slow and painful. It was not straightforward; they had so many stories which rather added to the confusion than to the main thought. The way they articulated their business processes was based on stories. They expressed themselves in numerous words, the volume of information made the message lost." [Ryan, Philippine, age 36]

4.2 Theme 2: Hidden assumptions

The next main theme that emerged from the interviews is that project members arrive with certain assumptions to global ERP rollout projects. As the Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's research (2012) has previously explained, socialisation in different corporate cultures within the same global company may still result in hidden assumptions and delayed or stalled projects, as the example below shows.

"The company I was working for acquired another company with products that could be combined and sold together in a package with our products. That would need new business processes in our template and with our consultant background we tried to find a solution which best fits the business. Whereas the solution architects thought that we already had a solution and the business had to work with that. It turned out only later that IT considered the "headquarters" to be our customer, while for the consultant team the customer was the "company that we were rolling out to". Because of these divergent approaches finally the project went on hold for a year. Having had the same understanding, it would have been a very different project." [Amit, Indian, age 33]

The importance of age and rank was also mentioned as a critical consideration especially in Asian countries. Subordinates tend to follow their superior, even against their own conviction. If a senior (by age) consultant expects an Asian project manager to express his honest opinion to have a smooth rollout he/she may not receive any valuable input due to cultural constraints.

"Asians are very easy to convince, because whoever gives the feeling of being elder or superior is treated as 100% correct. They convince themselves about it very easily. Whereas in Europe and in North America they do not believe automatically that you are correct." [Shyam, Indian, age 43]
"Normally in any Asian countries if your boss tells you to do this or that, you will just do it, because Asians tend to follow. Unlike in Europe or in America, when you are asked to do something, you would only do if you like to do it. You would not do things right away; you question the purpose if you disagree." [Carlo, Philippine, age 37]

Hidden assumptions pose a great threat to human relationships, which are vital in any business dealings. Behavioural patterns that are natural to us might not be decoded the same way by colleagues from other cultures. Ascribed social status (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012) may infer the feeling of special rights for a person leading to serious conflicts within a multicultural team. An interesting example emerged from one of the participants when describing the case of a Malaysian colleague, who assumed a similar hierarchy within her team as she was used to in her society.

"I had an Asian project manager under me, whose bad behaviour was not intentional, but it was more related to her culture. This person is from the upper class in Malaysia, she was raised by going to the best schools, driving the best cars, staying at the best hotels, people doing what she told them to do. She was used to doing it, because her family was like that, she was raised like that. When she joined the project she continued that behaviour, but you should understand her background before you start blaming her." [Jonas, Danish, age 55]

Understanding the high context nature of certain countries may sometimes be the only route to success. One of the highest context reactive cultures is Japan, where politeness and respect are key to success.

"The way the business articulates its processes is different how IT experiences it. The literal words can be the same, but the usage, the interpretation, and the context of the message is different. For example, "escalation" for the Japanese has a negative meaning, you should deal with the person first, they are not very tolerant towards the escalation process. While in IT this is the normal way to get a decision when you find something that was not included in the plan." [Ryan, Philippine, age 36]

This confirms the results of previous research (Lewis, 2018; Meyer, 2014) which found that nations with more words in their language are more rhetorical and more high context in their communication, which may be more difficult to follow by other less high context nations.

4.3 Theme 3: Work-life balance

The balance between work and private life, the relative position of the team members' countries on the Specificity versus Diffuseness scale of the Trompenaars-Hampden Turner model was less articulated within the issues, but five out of the ten interviewees mentioned that expectations on working hours might be very different among countries. In most Asian countries work life and private life is not separated while in Western countries private life is out of office hours. The recurring encroachment onto private life in these Asian countries may result in conflicts and the demotivation of international employees.

"The work-life balance is different in different countries. In Asian countries people tend to work longer

hours. Before I joined my current company, work-life balance was not a big thing for me; I used to work longer than nine-to-six, often until ten o'clock in the night. This is normal here; people take it as: this is how it is in the consulting world. After joining I started to realise how important work-life balance is in life. It was a shock to me when the first meeting invitation I sent to a colleague in Poland was declined, because it fell out of his working hours. I was surprised, because before that I was used to that I can talk to people immediately." [Ethan, Malaysian, age 35]

"Asians adopt the "die-die" approach, meaning sacrificing private time to perform the working tasks." [Carlo, Philippine, age 37]

4.4 Theme 4: Confrontation

The strongest challenge as to be expected within a multicultural project was the way people confront each other. Meyer (2014) extended the cultural dimension for business by two important dimensions: evaluation and disagreeing. According to her research, countries balance on a scale of direct and indirect feedback and confrontational and avoiding confrontation type of cultures. Countries on the scale have a relative position to each other. ERP rollout projects have rigid constraints set by the three factors of time, cost, and scope; therefore, it is vital to agree on local differences or necessary changes early on. At the same time in many Asian cultures people avoid confrontation or as previously mentioned always agree with the boss; moreover, they also respond to direct confrontation in a very negative way.

"In Asian countries we normally do not speak about someone negatively in public. I had difficulties with an Indian consultant, whose task was not moving at all. But I still could not speak up about him negatively; I could only say "Maybe you can get some help from another consultant". Europeans do speak up in public, but the debate is contained in the work itself, it does not get personal." [Ethan, Malaysian, age 35]

"In my experience, Eastern European articulation is strong and combative, meaning they like to debate and to challenge you. They attack with their arguments forcefully; the person in error does not have a way of being safe. With Japanese you must be polite, they do not appreciate strong personality. You need to be more courteous, and you articulate your thoughts in a better way, while in Europe you can raise your voice. For Thai people the challenge is:

"Okay I know that I did something wrong, but how can I express it in a meeting", it takes them some time to articulate the message in a way that is understandable for all." [Ryan, Philippine, age 36]

Considering the culturally appropriate way to discuss projects and ERP templates support the successful roll-out of projects. Although not every confrontational misunderstanding inflicts fatal consequences, managers may encounter more stress and, in some cases, human relationships suffer. In the absence of cultural understanding, colleagues who are familiar with confrontations may have the impression that their local counterpart is hiding something. Confrontation avoiders on the other hand, might be quietly hurt "forever" after being ashamed in front of their fellows. As both parties will feel uncomfortable in the presence of the other, communication between the team members, and by extension the overall efficiency of the project team, will substantially decrease, and stereotyping may be reinforced.

"If you confront that Moroccan consultant, it will not lead to any kind of positive result. It will lead to an argument but not to anything constructive." [Amit, Indian, age 33]

Direct negative feedback was grouped into this theme as the psychological impact is the same. Cultures that are not used to direct negative feedback like Japan, India or Malaysia may perceive feedback from a Dutch or a Danish superior as a shock.

"One time I had a bit of a cultural shock with my senior management. I was surprised because the way he talked to me was hard. He is Dutch. He had preconceived ideas that he collected from the rest of the team and when he had a conversation with me, he basically attacked me, rather than asking: How are you doing with the project? Do you need support? Can I help you with anything? Are you struggling with the team? Instead of coming that way, he just came to me and said: This, this and this are missing, why did not you do that? That was very hard on me, and I just crashed, because I put in so much energy, I worked so hard and we were very so close to have a successful go-live. Then somebody just comes and shoots at me." [Yasmin, Malaysian, age 37]
"In Denmark they are quite direct, I think, in the way they say things and what they expect to happen. They are quite blunt. They say the things out

like "This must be done this way"; without using any softeners as people with English mother-tongue would do. A person with English as a first language would say: "Have a look at this! Do you think this would be a better way of doing it?" The same applies to some extent to Germany, as well, because they can be quite direct. But I am not 100% sure whether it has something to do with the way they speak in general or whether it is just the way they speak English." [Kyle, Welsh, age 42]

Motivation and team cohesion is essential for effective project management. Confrontation and feedback styles are key to deliver the same message in an appropriate way to reach the goal. The above experiences show that this is one of the key challenges that may impede the delivery of successful projects.

4.5 Theme 5: Time management

The greatest challenge in project management is the endless balancing of the triangle of Scope, Time, and Budget. Finding the best compromises between these interdependent vertices needs careful planning; one can be favoured only at the expense of the other two. Time perception has several "shades" with relation to culture and business. Deadlines are the cornerstones of project management. India is one of the hubs of software engineering in the world, and all of this study's interviewees had had experience with Indian colleagues. The most complaints about time management were about India as well.

"In India you need to help your project team with time management to make them understand the deadlines. It is tough. You have to give them detailed orders. In other countries, you just give them the task and they will deliver it, because they are less easy going compared to Indians." [Jonas, Danish, age 55]
"When it comes to the way Indian people work, they do have the tendency of saying "yes, yes, yes". They do some work, but they are not very structured in the way they work. They accept that they must do it and they will do it, but they will do it in the wrong time. That does not work well in terms of a project delivery. Spain and Italy are a little bit like that as well, but not as bad as India." [Kyle, Welsh, age 42]

After a few missed deadlines project managers tend to micro-manage the local team, which is at least as frustrating for the team as their delays are to the project managers.

Interestingly, both Indian interview participants agreed that they are aware about being late, they dislike being late, but this is not something that they are able (or want) to change.

"I have always been accused of being late. I guess it is true, being late is embarrassing. … But actually, I am not always late. And you are right if it was so embarrassing then it would not happen second time. But it happens. … I think my colleagues are a bit crazy about being on time, pretty much everyone else than me." [Amit, Indian, age 33]

Under the pressure of keeping the balance of the Iron Triangle, consultants start to closely follow up their teams. It implies also more on-site presence and increase in cost. More confrontation is evident which has a negative impact especially in these countries that are confrontation avoiding. Planning is key, but cultural understanding needs to be taken in account if the aim is to sell a project with longer lead time to these countries.

"In Europe when we set a deadline, we do not tend to micro-manage people, unless we have a special case. Otherwise, everyone knows that there is a deadline and task to deliver. The behaviour of Malaysians and Singaporeans towards deadlines is different. They are more laid-back; they need to be followed through and reminded." [Yasmin, Malaysian, age 37]
"If you give the same task to someone in Germany and someone in Asia, they will react differently. For instance: about deadlines. Germans will stick to the deadline; they will go directly forward and if they don't reach it then they will tell you in advance. The Asian culture (except maybe Singapore) is like that they don't like to say that they cannot reach it; they will tell you on the day or past the deadline. Maybe they don't tell you at all and you have to discover it on your own." [Jonas, Danish, age 55]

4.6 Theme 6: Apparent lies
In the absence of cross-cultural absolute truth, our participants agreed that one should consider that truth has many "faces". What may be considered as an apparent lie (Meyer, 2014) by a German low context person, may only qualify as bending the truth for a high context person. This theme was the most sensitive for all respondents. Based on the responses, the fear of being blamed for a mistake or for a deficiency seems to be the main motive behind the quibbles and white lies that are often used in reactive cultures to save face.

"Thailand has a language barrier. Thai people are very emotional because they feel inferior; they tend to hide what they have in their mind. You have to be a bit cautious about what you say. If you reject their requirements, they may ignore you and will go live with a project where the quality is missing. They also use small lies to look credible and more appealing, because they are unsure and afraid." [Carlo, Philippine, age 37]
Singapore has a culture of saying "yes, yes, yes", but they do not really understand. That was one of the places where we really struggled, because we went through all the trainings, they said they understood it and when we went live, they didn't. We ended up with a lot of problems. I think they are trying to be polite, and they do not want to offend you because they do not understand. I suppose it is a lie, but they do not see it as a lie, they see it as being polite. [Kyle, Welsh, age 42]
In India they always say "okay, okay, okay", but when you look into the system then you can see that they have not even started the task yet. They do not communicate bad status properly but hide it under the good status reports." [Ryan, Philippine, age 36]

Project managers with previous exposure to such difficulties crave bullet-proof information, thus they tend to adopt the previously mentioned micro-management strategy, leading to lengthy status meetings. As a response, polychronic time-oriented colleagues will fabricate alternative realities to escape these lengthy conversations.

Apparent lies occur in various forms and in many situations in global ERP rollout projects, and can be considered to represent an important stress factor for international project managers.

5 Conclusion
The findings of the research are noteworthy in several respects.

Our study revealed the importance of existing barriers and their impact factor on the success of a project. Although the research is exploratory in nature and needs confirmatory analysis, it offers valuable insights into the hidden obstacles faced by international projects in the IT sector.

Besides using PM techniques and tools, an organisation needs to develop a set of shared cultural values among its members that support their adoption (Kendra and Taplin, 2004; Wang and Liu, 2007).

In our findings, the apparent lies theme was relevant especially when communicating between Asian and Western cultures. This was supported by our

research and originally stream from the "saving face" and "doctrine of mean" concepts of Asian cultures (Kirkbride and Tang, 1992; Chen and Tjosvold, 2002; Wang and Liu, 2007).

Wang and Liu (2007) found that Chinese traditional values/beliefs of Strong Hierarchy, Family Consciousness, and Boss Orientation to be the most apparent cultural barriers, and the Doctrine of the Mean (harmony is "most precious" in relationships) is not. In our findings, these relate to work-life balance, apparent lies, and confrontation topics. The phenomenological approach of the research supported the categorisation of several barriers impeding the success of global ERP rollout projects. Although intercultural management and leadership studies have focused on the categorisation of nations along specific dimensions, they have previously lacked the identification of those dimensions that may impose a high risk on the balance of the Iron Triangle of the project resulting is possible failure or added costs and time. Six themes have been identified as major cultural barriers to successful projects.

Language emerged as an important factor, even though the language skills were not debated. Participants revealed that understanding the context is just as important as speaking the words. Listening and learning habits highly differed as well, resulting in delays due to insufficient previous time management considering the different cultures. The previous work of Lewis (2006) and Lustig and Koester (2006) has already identified the necessity of considering context and listening. Our results confirm their perspectives for an industry with supposedly highly standardised terminology.

Assumptions are made based on one's own culture that may be decoded differently in other cultures (Schein, 1996). These assumptions only surface when there is an issue, leading to confrontation (Wang and Liu, 2007). They are difficult to avoid as assumptions are subconsciously coded in us by our socialisation processes; moreover, different dimensions of ethnocentric feelings can strengthen and negatively affect these assumptions (Malota and Berács, 2007).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (2012) work-life balance dimension was mentioned as a factor to which participants needed to adjust. Asians found it surprising that meetings could not be arranged outside of working hours in Europe. This factor weighted less among the overall constraints, but if overwork was due to other, e.g., time-related differences, the negative experience heightened.

Confrontation and negative feedback turned out to be in our research the most important barrier with the highest impact on the successful outcome, strongly emphasising the relative position of nations on Meyer's (2014)

scale. Asian cultures avoid confrontation and experience psychological suffering when given direct negative feedback. In the case of Chinese colleagues especially, as highlighted by Wang and Liu (2007), as well as project team members from other Asian cultural backgrounds, a conventional Dutch or Danish performance appraisal might well elicit a cultural shock. Such differences in communication styles may not only delay a project but may also destroy human relationships. Training on these two dimensions is essential to preservinging the balance of the Iron Triangle and team cohesion.

Time orientation was another barrier, which respondents emphasised as it directly relates to the triple constraints. Our results further revealed that not only deadlines, but punctuality for meetings or the length of meetings are just as important as keeping deadlines. The findings support previous studies that have shown the importance of scheduling (Hall, 1966; Meyer, 2014; Kluckhorn and Stodtbeck, 1961).

Apparent lies was the most sensitive theme that emerged from the narratives. In Asian cultures, saving face in front of the group is a cultural value that will be preserved at all costs. Bending the truth about the status of one's project or pretending to understand the explanations of the consultant, when in reality it was not comprehended, may be considered a white lie in low context cultures, resulting in loss of trust or micromanagement and delays.

The present research extends insights into the ongoing discussion on cross cultural communication barriers in global business by identifying multiple aspects of hidden barriers that impede the appropriate balancing of time, cost and scope for a project. The results and conclusions can support companies in the IT sector in their efforts to develop and focus on the interrelated intercultural communication competencies among their international employees. The results support companies in the IT sector to develop and focus on the related intercultural communication competencies among participants. The lack of knowledge, awareness and education about cross-cultural communication hinders successful rollouts of global IT projects, and it should be addressed by focused intercultural training within global companies and multicultural teams.

5.1 Managerial consequences

On a pilot project, a global company specialising in ERP systems has changed a few Asian roll out projects' processes by incorporating our insights.

Taking differences in how time is perceiving (as either circular or linear), the design phase of the project (consisting of the "kick-off", requirement gathering, fit-gap

analysis and blueprinting steps) was adjusted so that a system demo and access to a fully functioning test system ("sandbox") was given to the receiving organisation long before the official kick-off took place. The pace of the kick-off meeting was decreased by splitting it over multiple days, with the solution demo repeated on the first day and with shorter but recurring breakout sessions also split over multiple days. This change supported the reactive culture's listening habits by "cycles of understanding" along with providing a tangible practice environment for better understanding. The terminology that was used within the application was also clearer for all parties, thanks to the hands-on experience substantially decreasing misunderstandings by hidden assumptions. Changing lengthy sessions to 30-minute meetings with adequate gap in between, and planning project meetings only for every other day meanwhile enabled Asian partners to better understand, and internally discuss, new information. This latter change had an interesting impact on the communication dynamics as well. Most Asian partners, being confrontation avoidant, during the days without meetings clarified unclear details, requested support, and even reported risk of delays through informal channels

typically via private calls and chat messages to the leading project manager and the consultant team. Apparent lies to avoid confrontation, losing face or credibility in the meetings decreased, resulting in a measurably better balance for the Iron Triangle of the project.

6 Limitations and future research
The limitations of the research chiefly arise due to the methodology of qualitative research and sampling. The aim of the phenomenological research was to gain a deeper understanding of the intercultural communication barriers among experienced global managers. Due to the strict purposeful sampling method, the size of the sample was limited, but its potential usefulness was tested during an ERP application rollout project of a global company that changed its project management process for Asian clients with a measurable positive impact. The changes related to language and listening habits, hidden assumptions, confrontation, and apparent lies dimensions.

Future research should therefore consider using a confirmatory approach to identify the strength of impact of the different themes on more global IT rollout projects. The results could potentially be generalisable to other industries as well.

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