

Intercultural Issues in Recruitment

Author: Huib Wursten¹

For international organizations, recruiting the right people is of paramount importance. Coping in the complex international environment requires organizations to employ the people with the competences they need. HR and recruitment departments, therefore, develop profiles containing these desired competences.

Such profiles usually contain a listing of skills and character traits. Interestingly, however, organizations rarely consider the fact that the degree to which skills and traits are desirable, differs from one country to another. The impact of management skills is culture-specific. Management techniques or leadership styles that work in one national culture do not necessarily work elsewhere.

The work of managers is constrained by its cultural context. Peter Drucker once wrote: “What managers do is the same the world over, how they do it is determined by culture and tradition.” It is impossible to coordinate the actions of people without a deep understanding of their values, beliefs, and expressions. Different cultures define desirable expertise and competences differently. Recruitment officers who are not aware of the impact of this diversity end up ‘cloning’. In other words, they establish one profile of desired core competences that fits the expectations of one culture, but that may not work somewhere else. Suppose an American organization needs somebody to work in Japan or with Japanese counterparts. A good example of a desirable trait in the American-based profile is the preference for straight talk. However, in the Japanese environment indirect communication is the preferred. This discrepancy potentially results in the newly hired manager being dysfunctional in his new working environment, which could prove very costly.

This article explores the influence of cultural differences on recruitment. We will first focus on diversity as such and the need for cultural understanding. We follow that up with an analysis of the cultural implications of eight competences often used by recruiters.

¹ Huib Wursten, born in The Hague in The Netherlands, is a senior consultant with itim International. He is specialized in advising companies and supra-national organizations in how to manage global teams and is experienced in translating strategies and policies into practical consequences for management. Since 1989, he has been working in this field with a variety of Fortune top 1000 companies.

Should there be diversity?

The first question that needs to be answered is: *should there be diversity?* In other words, what is the benefit of diversity for organizations? Diversity may have various sources (age, gender, race, religion); here we will focus on different ways of approaching organizational behavior in relationship with differences in national culture. One way to analyze this question is by looking at the ultimate *raison d'être* for the organization. How does it satisfy its clients? In any organization, managers are concerned with the coordination of resources (material, financial, and human) for the effective and efficient achievement of business objectives. From what has been said in the introduction, it will be clear that what may be an effective and efficient way of coordination in one country may prove to be ineffective, inefficient or even counter-productive in another. This is particularly true in the area of human resource management, where the effectiveness of different approaches to such crucial issues as leadership, communication, motivation, appraisal, selection, and reward is highly culture-dependent.

To answer the question about the need for diversity, it is necessary to define the organization's client system and then analyze and decide if '*client satisfaction*' needs to be defined in a uniform way or in different ways. The answer in private companies is easy. If clients are diverse in their expectations, the organization has to be prepared to create diversity in its strategic approaches. Now, an important recommendation to companies is that structure should follow strategy. In other words, if the organization needs to satisfy different client expectations, it must create the internal systems to do so. Consequently, the diversity of client expectations should be mirrored within the organization and diversity should not be considered a liability, but as an asset to the organization. The best way to establish and manage the level of internal diversity is by recruiting the people that bring in the required diversity in skills and traits. (Naturally, organizations also need to look for unity, but this is a different topic, with its own cultural implications, outside the scope of this article.)

A challenging element in the discussion about diversity is that the majority of publications written on organizational behavior originate from Anglo-Saxon countries. Students across the world read these publications and they might believe these theories can be applied everywhere. For some time now, there is a growing realization that many of these theories are true and valid in their own cultural context. Outside that context they can be meaningless and sometimes even counter-productive.

In order to analyze the need for diversity, while acknowledging the cultural context of theories, Professor Geert Hofstede 5-Dimensional Model for cultural differences offers a practical roadmap.

An understanding of Hofstede's Model enables managers to predict the likely outcomes of management techniques and employment policies in different national contexts and to modify or replace them where these approaches could be dysfunctional.

The Need for Cultural Understanding

Below, you will find a brief outline of the 5-Dimensional Model, based on Prof. Hofstede's research on Intercultural Management. The 5 dimensions represent common issues in the cultural systems of countries and are centered on five fundamental areas of human behavior to which every human society has to find its particular answers. The set of each country's statistically-determined "scores" on the five dimensions forms a model for its culture. The "score" data now exist for 70 countries and three multi-country regions.

1 The power-distance (PDI) dimension

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power.

2 Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)

The high side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "we."

3 Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)

The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation,

modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.

4 Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)

The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.

5 Long-term versus short-term orientation (LTO)

The long-term orientation dimension (LTO) can be interpreted as dealing with society's search for virtue. Societies with a short-term orientation generally have a strong concern with establishing the absolute Truth. They are normative in their thinking. They exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. In societies with a long-term orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

Taken together, the 5 dimensions have profound implications for organizational models and what we expect from organizations and their people. There are 6 clusters of countries showing similarities in their scores for the 5 dimensions (for example: low power distance – individualism - masculinity – weak uncertainty avoidance - short-term orientation). Itim has developed a tool that can help people focus on the similarities and differences between the six clusters.² Clustering countries this way reduces complexity and helps to make the influence of culture visible and tangible to managers and others working in a different cultural setting from their own.

By using the 5-D Model, aided by the six country clusters, managers are able to analyze:

1. Differences in the relevance of core competences and skills
2. Differences in the profiles of cognitive abilities between the populations from which recruitment officers and applicants are drawn
3. Differences in expected patterns of interaction

² Contact itim via info@itim.org if you want to read more about the six culture clusters

The consequences of culture on thinking patterns

When analyzing the influence of cultural differences on recruitment, one of the most fundamental elements to take into account is the difference in thinking patterns and reasoning between cultures that score either high or low on the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. All Anglo-Saxon countries score low on Uncertainty Avoidance. Their approach to the thinking process is called pragmatism, an essential element of which is induction (i.e. moving from practice to theory). An example of this approach is found in the way educational books from these countries are structured. The first chapters will contain case studies, samples, and descriptions of what is found in practice. After that, the author will provide an induction to develop a 'best practice' or a theory. The famous American philosopher John Dewey, also called the father of pragmatism, once defined truth in the following way: *"truth is truth when it works"*. It is in this type of cultural environment that people like slogans such as, *"just do it!"* (the famous Nike marketing pay-off).

Attributes of this (low Uncertainty Avoidance) way of thinking include:

- Focus on practice and not on theories or philosophies
- High esteem for practitioners and less for experts
- Focus on empiricism
- Preference for action above reflection
- Focus on being 'persuasive' in communication

People in countries that score high on Uncertainty Avoidance, on the other hand, (e.g. France) consider Dewey's definition of truth an example of superficiality. In such cultures people prefer a deductive way of thinking. This way of thinking is called 'Cartesian', after the French philosopher Descartes who wrote: *"cogito ergo sum"*; I think so I exist.

Attributes of this (high Uncertainty Avoidance) way of thinking include:

- Emphasis on defining principles for behavior or developing a philosophy before action
- Experts are given the highest esteem; they create the framework for understanding
- Focus in communication is on challenging and/or validating expertise

Cultural implications of 8 well known competences used in recruitment

The above example shows the impact of cultural differences on the way people think. It indicates we should consider the fact that recruitment officers as well as the recruitment process can be culturally biased. To illustrate this even better, we will use the 5-D Model to analyze the cultural implications of eight competences often used by recruiters.

Competence # 1: Sound Judgment

Analyzes issues and problems thoroughly, systematically, and from multiple perspectives; makes timely, well-reasoned decisions; makes effective decisions in the face of uncertainty

Cultural implications:

None of the keywords related to “sound judgment” are culturally neutral. The underlying dimension creating most of the bias is Uncertainty Avoidance.

In countries with a weak Uncertainty Avoidance, for example Anglo-Saxon countries, a thorough and systematic analysis should always be done with effectiveness and time constraints in mind. This means that in comparison to cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance attitude thorough analysis takes more time. For weak uncertainty avoiding societies the thinking process goes from the specifics or practice to a conclusion or to a general theory, it is inductive.

In countries with a high score on Uncertainty Avoidance, for example Germany, a thorough and systematic analysis means a deductive approach as described in the previous paragraph. There is a need to first understand the principles, philosophy or context of a certain proposal, then develop a theory and as a last step take meaningful actions.

Also the dimension Long-Term Orientation affects sound judgment as a competence. Cultures with a low score on this dimension are characterized by the assumption that there is one, undividable truth. However, in long-term orientated countries, Asian countries, multiple truths may co-exist. This means that the thorough and systematic analysis sought in the Western world, in an Asian environment takes the shape of synthetic abilities. What is true or who is right is less important than what works. How the efforts of individuals with different thinking patterns can be coordinated toward a common goal is a part of sound judgment in cultures with a long-term orientation focus.

Competence # 2: Strategic Vision

Initiates programs of research and work that are consistent with the company mission and broader departmental strategies; ensures that work in the short term is aligned with the longer-term objectives of the organization.

Cultural implications:

In long-term oriented cultures, long term thinking takes the shape of the next 10 or 20 years. In short-term oriented countries, long term thinking is confined to the next (half) year. So who decides on what behaviour is needed to align with the longer term objectives of the organization? Should there be a focus on cutting costs and making a profit at the end of this year, or should the focus lie on investing in the work environment in order to make the employees feel safe and secure at the workplace in return for their loyalty to the company in difficult times?

In strong Uncertainty Avoidance cultures, consistency over time is appreciated in addition to very detailed planning procedures and systems. When a strategic vision is introduced, it is presented in detail. In weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures, the tendency is to be flexible. Pinpointing desired results in the future is good, but descriptions on how to get there should not be too rigid.

Competence # 3: Planning & Organizing

Plans, prioritizes, and effectively manages the work of the division

Cultural implications:

Planning is different in its emphasis across cultures. In strong Uncertainty Avoidance cultures it takes the most dominant form; agreed planning systems are sacred. In weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures planning takes the form of a broad framework of negotiated objectives. The way to achieve the objectives is often not clearly 'frozen'. The higher the score for Uncertainty Avoidance, the higher the tendency to avoid risks, and the more there is a tendency to prepare contingency plans. The lower the score for Uncertainty Avoidance, the more there is a tendency to cope with problems as they arise. The key word in the competence description is effectiveness. What is being considered effective planning in one culture will be perceived as time-consuming, too detailed and unfocused in another culture.

Competence # 4: Drive for Results

Drives for closure, results, and success; persists when faced with obstacles and challenges

Cultural implications:

Again, the keywords are not cultural neutral. In cultures with a high score on Masculinity one finds a strong appreciation for words like challenges, success and persistence. In Feminine cultures, on the other hand, the emphasis is on cooperation and relationships. In these cultures, results are not necessarily considered in terms of the best, the highest or the most.

Evaluation of results is done in a different way. In a Masculine, low Power Distance country like the USA it is done through formalized assessment instruments, which check if fixed targets are met. In Feminine cultures like Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, there is a tendency for constant scans to see how actions are working out in practice. The targets are renegotiable.

Competence # 5: Adaptability

Demonstrates openness and flexibility when faced with change; copes effectively with pressure and adversity

Cultural implications:

The appreciation for openness and flexibility is dependent on a strong or weak Uncertainty Avoidance. Pragmatism is seen as sloppy, unpredictable behavior in strong Uncertainty Avoidance cultures. The need for control is high and therefore planning is required beforehand. Too many changes will create de-motivation. The weaker the Uncertainty Avoidance, the quicker people will be willing to react. In high Uncertainty Avoidance cultures the tendency is to first gather data before any action is taken.

The way people cope with pressure and adversity is also dependent on the scores on Masculinity and Individualism. For instance, in Masculine countries, the tendency is to think in terms of winning and losing. Admitting failure in practice is difficult. In Collectivistic cultures (low score on individualism), losing face is the biggest punishment people can get.

Competence # 6: Delegating

Effectively matches people with tasks; assigns clear accountabilities and authority; adjusts directions and support to the needs of the situation

Cultural implications:

The concept of delegation is different in different cultures. In low Power Distance countries the subordinates are supposed to work in an autonomous way. They are expected to take responsibility for their content areas and need to react to a changing environment (whatever works!).

In high Power Distance countries, on the other hand, subordinates expect strict instructions about what to do and how to do it. If unforeseen things happen, the subordinates first need to go back to their direct boss to ask for instructions before they can act.

In low Power Distance countries one believes in: *“No news is good news”*. This has an impact on the way accountability is assigned and directions are adjusted. In low Power Distance countries, superiors can expect subordinates to give direct negative feedback if things are developing in an unexpected direction. Due to basic trust between the different levels, if there is no such negative feedback, a superior can assume things are going according to plan.

This is completely different in high Power Distance countries. In these countries people do not see their superiors as equals; hierarchy is an existential fact of life and superiors are from a different level of society. Therefore, there is basic distrust between the levels and people will not volunteer to give negative feedback to their superiors. They will give it only when being asked for it. In high Power Distance countries which are also Collectivistic (for example China, India, Mexico, and Brazil), the danger of losing face makes the sharing of negative information to superiors even more problematic. Again, this has an impact on the way accountability is assigned and directions are adjusted.

Competence # 7: Fostering Teamwork

Promotes cooperation and teamwork within the work unit and across departments and organization lines

Cultural implications:

We can find an interesting paradox here. The explanation seems to be easy: the more Collectivistic a culture is, the stronger the team cohesion. In reality this is not always true. It is true if the team is homogeneous, coming from one ethnic, religious, geographic, 'in-group'. However, if this is not the case it takes a lot of effort to develop trust and relationship. For example, to develop a winning soccer team in Brazil (a Collectivistic country), the players are recruited from different teams, come from

different areas, and sometimes play in foreign countries. These individual players have a tendency to be loyal only to the people from their own in-group and try to show off their skills to the people back home. It takes a lot of time to bring them together and to forge a sense of synergy among the players. The more Individualistic a culture is, the easier this is because the individuals submit themselves rationally to a common goal. However, in an Individualistic culture which is also Masculine, the competition among the team members can create obstacles for effective teamwork.

Competence # 8:

Oral Presentation; Speaks clearly, articulately, and persuasively to command attention, establish credibility, and gain influence

Written Communication; Uses written documents and reports to communicate in an influential and effective manner

Creating Open Communication; Listens and promotes a free flow of information and communication inside and outside the company.

Cultural implications:

In the above description we find culturally biased words such as speaking persuasively and establishing trust. Whereas in high Power Distance and Masculine countries persuasive speaking will gain credibility and status, Feminine cultures will find this unpleasant because they perceive it as showing off.

A good oral presentation in a strong Uncertainty Avoidance culture will consist of a sound theoretical base. In these cultures, experts are highly appreciated, communication is 'sender-oriented'; the receiver should try to understand what the expert is saying about the subject. In weak Uncertainty Avoidance countries communication is 'receiver-oriented'. The expert should try to 'translate' ideas to the mindset of the receiver and try to persuade the receiver to see it in his/her way.

Furthermore, in Collectivistic countries, communication is affected by people trying to avoid disharmony and loss of face. There is a tendency to communicate what the other party wants to hear. There is an emphasis on high context versus low context types of communication. This means that oral communication is preferred over written.

Having an open communication with a free flow of information is not desirable in high Power Distance countries. In these countries, bosses have the tendency to see information as part of their power position and they tend to act according to 'a need-to-know' basis only. Subordinates are often only informed about the data for the task at hand, as knowledge gives power. In low Power Distance countries, on the other hand, for example Scandinavian countries and Germany, open sharing and discussions among team members is encouraged.

Conclusion

In a globalizing world, we can envision a lot of diversity in expectations around the important elements of organizational behavior. The consequences are that organizations should prepare themselves for coping with this diversity.

In this article we have discussed the impact of cultural differences on recruitment. While using Professor Geert Hofstede's 5-Dimensional Model we have shown that recruitment officers as well as the recruitment process can be culturally biased. We analyzed eight competences, often used by recruiters, to illustrate the need for a cultural understanding as well as the need for adaptation of required competences to the market the candidate should work in. Cultural competent recruitment enables managers to predict the likely outcomes of management techniques and employment policies in different national contexts and to modify or replace them where these approaches could be dysfunctional.

The challenge is to let the internal diversity reflect the existing external diversity. It is an asset to have staff with diverse competences essential for an organization to cope with the international environment. This can be achieved by adopting a more conscious approach to diversity in the recruitment of staff.