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International culture

Frameworks for understanding national culture covering Schein's three levels, Hofstede's four dimensions, and Trompenaars's seven key differences

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By understanding other national cultures' values, attitudes and behaviours, employees can gain greater insight into how cultural norms manifest in different countries and contexts. Although some methods used to categorise culture have been criticised, they do provide a useful means to understand the likely differences between societies. This is especially important for employees working on an international basis; understanding the culture of the country they're based in, and the differences from their own culture, will improve working relationships and business success.

This factsheet looks at why understanding cultural difference matters and outlines various frameworks researchers have suggested for understanding national cultures: Schein's three levels, Hofstede's four dimensions, and Trompenaars's seven key differences.

CIPD viewpoint

Employees working internationally need to be able to work effectively in the country and culture where they are placed. This requires any potential assignee to have a high level of self-awareness of their own assumptions and sensitivities. It's helpful to explore the dimensions and definitions of culture which researchers have identified. But to operate effectively, individuals must examine their own cultural background to understand how this will impact on their judgements and perceptions of the behaviour of those from different cultural backgrounds. For a successful assignment, these factors should be given as much consideration as the assignee's technical competence for the posting.

Understanding cultures

Culture is a distinct way of life with common values, attitudes and behaviours that are adopted by a society. It's the 'way we do things round here'. In understanding cultures, an important starting point is a high level of self-awareness and one's own cultural assumptions. Although there are varying definitions of culture, a common theme of these definitions is that it is a way that a society is shaped.

Although it's generally accepted that the increase in travel and technology has led to a blurring of some distinctions, there are still clearly definable differences between different countries and ethnic groups which national culture is often seen to help to explain. National culture has been defined by Hofstede¹ as the collective programming of the mind that differentiates members of one social group from another. Despite the popularity and accessibility of cultural frameworks, in particular Hofstede's work and the more recent studies by the GLOBE network², this is a complex area. Cultural differences are typically manifest in areas such as food, customs, language, housing and entertainment. It is important that those working on an international basis also understand that culture impacts on the ways in which people work, and behave when working. Although the outward signs of work (such as dress and technology) might be increasingly similar regardless of the country of operation, there are ways in which people can be offended, and business propositions damaged, if there is no understanding of the national culture of the people involved.

There are many examples of simple actions being interpreted differently in different cultures. For example:

- In the USA a firm, short handshake is seen as being confident. In Africa it is appropriate for a handshake to be limp and last several minutes.
- In Austria it would not be appropriate to address someone by their first name after several times of meeting. In the UK it would not be uncommon to move to using first names during an initial meeting.
- In Japan it's not usual to say that something is not possible. It's more likely that an individual will simply be told that something 'is very difficult'. Those who are not used to Japanese culture might think that this means that it is still possible, albeit difficult, when they are really being told that something is impossible.

Frameworks for understanding national culture

Schein³ suggested that there are three levels at which culture is expressed:

- easily observed rituals and behaviours (dress codes, language and customs)
- values and beliefs (for example views about the role of leadership in terms of being autocratic or seeking consensus)
- basic assumptions – these are less immediately visible but impact organisational life (for example values about the importance and closeness of relationships, hierarchy and responsibility of the individual to the community and family).

Although many of the methods used to measure culture have been criticised, they do provide a useful means to understanding the likely differences between societies.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions

One of the most widely used frameworks for determining the differences was developed by Hofstede⁴ who suggested that the differences in culture between countries could be explained by four main factors.

Power distance

This is the extent to which organisations and societies believe that power should be distributed equally or unequally. In work terms this relates to the centralisation of authority within an organisation, and the extent to which leadership is autocratic. Societies with 'high power distance' are hierarchical organisations in which it is accepted that the more senior employees have more power. Countries with a high power distance include the Philippines, Singapore, France and Greece. Countries with a low power distance have flatter organisation structures and a less autocratic style of management, examples being the UK, Sweden and New Zealand.

In a culture where there is a high power distance employees must realise that the hierarchical structure in the organisation should be respected. In such countries it would be inappropriate to expect a more junior employee to make an important decision without deference to more senior management.

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which organisations and societies feel uncomfortable with ambiguous situations, and the extent to which they will try to avoid uncertain situations. France is an example of a country with a high uncertainty avoidance, and in this country there is a strong bureaucratic structure which helps to avoid risk taking. Countries such as the UK, Sweden and Norway have low uncertainty avoidance and have more flexible structures and accept more diverse views.

In a culture where there is high uncertainty avoidance employees must accept that there is likely to be a certain amount of bureaucracy associated with business activities. Trying to avoid this bureaucracy is likely to be impossible, and also likely to cause difficulties with local employees.

Individualism

Individualism is the extent to which people operate as part of a group, or on an individual basis. In the USA, for example, individualism is high and people look after themselves. This is also increasing true of the UK, with individuals moving towards personal employment contracts and individually negotiated reward packages. In countries with low individualism, such as Japan, being part of a group is a strong need and promotes considerable loyalty to that group.

In a culture where there is low individualism (a collectivist society) there is considerable focus on operating as part of a group. Employees working in such countries on an international placement need to understand that they must fit in as part of a group, and not try to encourage individuals to operate separately to the group to which they belong.

Masculinity

This refers to the extent to which the dominant values in a society are what Hofstede described as 'male' – assertiveness, acquisition of money and goods and not caring for others. In more 'masculine' societies, like Japan, Austria, Mexico, and Italy the gender roles are more rigidly defined than in more 'feminine' societies like Scandinavian countries, with their greater emphasis on work-life balance.

Trompenaars' cultural dimensions

Trompenaars⁵ identified seven key differences between country cultures:

Achievement v ascription

In different cultures individuals will use different emphases in answering the question of what they do. In the UK people will tell you their profession if they are asked what they do. In Japan they will say who they work for. This shows a difference in the importance placed on what people achieve themselves, and the emphasis they place on another group.

In a culture where there is strong loyalty to a group employees must be careful not to say or do anything that suggests a negative opinion of that group. That could be more damaging to a business situation, in such cultures, than personally offending an individual.

Sequential v synchronic

This dimension relates to time. Time can be thought of as both the speed at which it passes and the current time. In Western societies there tends to be a lot of focus on the future. In the AsiaPacific region the past is as important as the present, with little emphasis on the future.

In Western societies there is a lot of emphasis on time management, and it would be considered rude to be late for a meeting without good reason being given. In other cultures there is a more relaxed attitude to time, and hurrying someone along or showing anger at a meeting starting late would be seen as inappropriate.

Internal v external control

In cultures with an internal control (such as the USA) people tend to think that they can control, or overcome, any constraints imposed by the environment. However, in cultures with a stronger external control, such as in many European countries, there is not the same view that environmental restrictions can be overcome. In such cultures there will be more emphasis on finding a solution within the restrictions that exist, rather than trying to work out ways to remove or challenge those restrictions.

Individualism v collectivism

This dimension was also suggested by Hofstede (see above).

Universalism v particularism

This is the extent to which people believe that general principles are important compared with unique circumstances and relationships. Trompenaars suggests that there are four key implications of this for international businesses:

- **Contracts.** In a particularist culture, drawing up a lengthy and detailed contract may be seen as a lack of trust or respect. It is presumed that those involved in the contract are trustworthy, and that once their word is given the contract is confirmed.
- **The timing of business trips.** Those who are from a universalist culture need to take time to build up strong relationships. This might mean that a number of trips and meetings need to take place before a business deal can be agreed.
- **The role of head office.** In universalist cultures, head offices tend to control global functions, whereas they do not do this in particularist cultures. In a universalist culture, therefore, business will need to be agreed and approved by a head office.
- **Job evaluation and reward.** In universalist cultures, there is more likely to be standardised evaluation and measurement, but in particularist cultures there is more likely to be individual determination of evaluation and reward.

Specific v diffuse

This dimension addresses the extent to which individuals are comfortable dealing with other people. Those in specific cultures (such as the USA and UK) tend to have a lot of openness, and less private life. They appear more direct, open and extrovert – even to the extent of appearing abrasive at times. They are more likely to separate work and home life. Those with diffuse relationships (such as Germany) are the opposite – appearing more indirect, closed and introvert and are more likely to evade issues.

Affectivity v neutrality

This dimension refers to the ways in which different cultures express relationships. In affective cultures it is natural to express emotions very openly, but in neutral cultures emotions are kept in check. This can be particularly evident in communication. In countries such as the UK it is usual to respond to someone once they have finished talking, and not to interrupt them (indeed, interrupting can be interpreted as being very rude). In Latin countries it is usual for people to talk over each other. In Oriental cultures it is usual to have gaps in conversations.

Applying the theories

When working internationally, employees should be sure to consider the dimensions of culture of the country where they are to be placed, and identify the way in which behaviour must be modified to fit in with the cultural approaches. The work of researchers like Hofstede and Trompenaars provides a generalised statement about countries and their culture. However, it's important to be aware that everyone is at risk of judging others based on stereotypes and we all need to observe and test our assumptions about individuals and groups with an appropriate level of sensitivity.

References

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3. SCHEIN, E H (1985) *Organisational culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
4. HOFSTEDE, G (2001) *Culture's consequences*. London: Thousand Oaks.
5. TROMPENAARS, F (1993) *Riding the waves of culture: understanding cultural diversity in business*. London: Economist Books.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

Geert Hofstede website - provides more information about the Hofstede dimensions of culture and allows you to compare and contrast your own culture with one you're visiting

Intercultural Business Communication tool

Books

BREWSTER, C., HOULDSWORTH, E., SPARROW, P. and VERNON, G. (2016) *International human resource management*. 4th ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Chapter 3: The impact of national culture; Chapter 4: Culture and organisation life.

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Journals

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This factsheet was last updated by Dr Liz Houldsworth, one of the co-authors of the 4th edition of CIPD's textbook [International human resource management](#).

