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Assignment 1: International Business Communications and Cultural
Challenges between the UK and Bangladesh

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Introduction

International business and communication have become increasingly important in our globalized world. With advancements in technology and transportation, it has become easier for companies to expand their reach beyond their domestic markets and engage with customers and partners from different cultures and backgrounds. This has led to a growing need for businesses to have a strong understanding of cross-cultural communication and to adapt their strategies to different markets and audiences. (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003)

In this context, inclusivity has become a critical factor for success. Inclusive international business practices prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of operations, including communication, hiring, and decision-making. This means valuing the perspectives and contributions of individuals from diverse backgrounds and creating an environment where everyone feels respected, supported, and able to contribute to the organization's goals. (Newburry *et al*, 2022)

Effective communication is a fundamental aspect of inclusive international business practices. Communicating effectively across cultures requires understanding and sensitivity to differences in language, customs, and communication styles. Inclusive communication practices also require recognizing and addressing any biases or assumptions that may impact how messages are received by different audiences. (Godykunst, 2005)

Considering the willingness of a UK based company to expand its operation in developing country, the report will address the differences in cultural expectations and cultural sensitivity between the UK and Bangladesh, which was chosen as a developing country for the aim of the current report. The first chapter will provide a general overview of Bangladesh in terms of demographics, economy, culture, then an application of the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions model will be made to assess the cultural differences between the UK and Bangladesh. The paper will also critically evaluate the cultural sensitivity when doing business in Bangladesh, supported by relevant examples. Different communication barriers and challenges that foreign businesses in Bangladesh experience will be analysed. Finally, recommendations and appropriate strategies will be provided to enable the UK company to succeed in the Bangladesh market.

Bangladesh – General Overview

Bangladesh is a South Asian country located on the Bay of Bengal, bordered by India to the north, east, and west, and Myanmar to the southeast. Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, but it has a diverse cultural heritage, with influences from Hindu, Buddhist, and British colonial traditions. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023)

Population: Bangladesh has a population of over 165 million people, making it the eighth most populous country in the world. It is the most densely populated country in the world with over 1,100 people per square kilometre. (The World Counts, 2023) Most of the population lives in rural areas, with agriculture being a significant source of income for many people.

Culture: Bangladesh has a diverse and vibrant culture with influences from Hindu, Buddhist, and British colonial traditions. The country has a predominantly Muslim population, but there are also significant Hindu and Buddhist minorities. Bangladeshi culture is known for its literature, music, dance, and art.

Language: Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh, and it is spoken by the majority of the population. English is also widely spoken and used in business, education, and government. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023)

Economy: Bangladesh is a developing country with a focus on agriculture, textiles, and manufacturing. The economy has been growing at an average rate of 6% over the past decade, and the government has set a goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2021. In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant strides in technology advancements, with a growing IT and software development sector. (Zafar *et al.*, 2020)

Workforce and Unemployment: Bangladesh has a young and growing workforce, with a median age of 26,3 against a global value of 30,3. (World Economics, 2023) The country has a high labour force participation rate, with the majority of the population engaged in agriculture and informal sector jobs. However, unemployment remains a significant challenge, particularly among youth and women. According to the World Bank, the unemployment rate in Bangladesh was 4.7% in 2022. (The World Bank Group, 2023)

Poverty and Income Inequality: Bangladesh has made significant progress in reducing poverty, with the poverty rate falling from over 50% in the 1990s to around 20% in recent years. However, income inequality remains a persistent issue, country's inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient reaching 0.57 in 2022, up from 0.46 in 2010. (Al-Amin, 2023)

Bangladesh is a country with a rich cultural heritage, a developing economy, and a young and growing workforce. The country faces significant challenges such as high unemployment and income inequality, but it has made significant strides in recent years and is positioned for continued growth and development.

Cultural Dimensions - Hofstede

Hofstede cultural dimensions can be used to compare different cultures on various dimensions such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. Based on these cultural dimensions below is a comparison between the UK and Bangladesh:

Individualism versus Collectivism: With a score of 89 the UK is a highly individualistic culture, where people value personal autonomy, independence, and self-expression. For the British society happiness lays in personal fulfilment. In contrast, Bangladesh is a collectivist culture (score 20), where people prioritize group harmony, interdependence, and loyalty to their family or community. The culture promotes close connections where individuals hold themselves accountable for the well-being of their group members.

Power Distance: In the UK, there is a relatively low power distance (ranking score of 35), meaning that people expect more equality and fairness in social and professional settings. In contrast, Bangladesh has a high-power distance with a score of 80, where hierarchy and authority are respected, and people are more accepting of unequal distribution of power and wealth. In business terms it could be said that subordinates are more likely to expect to be told what to do.

Uncertainty Avoidance: At a score of 35 the UK has a low uncertainty avoidance culture, meaning that people are more open to change, innovation, and risk-taking. Regarding work, this leads to a style of planning that focuses less on minute details and places more emphasis on understanding the ultimate objective. The planning process is characterized by flexibility and adaptability to accommodate changes in the environment. Additionally, the planning time frame tends to be shorter.

In contrast, Bangladesh, scoring 60 on this dimension, has a high uncertainty avoidance culture, where people prefer stability, predictability, and conformity. These cultures possess a strong emotional attachment to rules, even if they may not always be effective. They value the concept of time as a valuable resource, and individuals are often driven by a desire to stay productive and work diligently. The culture emphasizes precision and punctuality, and may not be as receptive to innovation. Additionally, personal security is a significant motivator for individuals within this cultural context.

Long-term Orientation: The UK is a relatively short-term oriented culture, where people prioritize immediate gratification, quick results, and short-term planning. In contrast, Bangladesh is a long-term oriented culture, where people prioritize persistence, patience, and investing in the future.

In the case of the UK and Bangladesh, although their scores on this dimension are close (51 and 47 respectively), their cultural orientations are different because they prioritize different values and behaviours. For instance, even though the UK has a relatively short-term orientation, it still places a high value on individualism and immediate results, which is reflected in their business practices. In contrast, Bangladesh's long-term orientation is based on values such as respect for tradition, perseverance, and investment in long-term relationships and projects.

Indulgence versus Restraint: With a high score of 69, the UK is a relatively indulgent culture, where people are more open to enjoying life, pleasure, and personal fulfilment. In cultures that score high on the indulgence dimension, individuals tend to prioritize fulfilling their desires and impulses related to enjoying life and having fun. They typically have a positive outlook and are inclined towards optimism.

In contrast, with a low Indulgence score of 20, Bangladesh is a restrained culture, where people are more conservative, modest, and self-disciplined. Societies that score high on the restraint dimension typically do not prioritize leisure time and have a tendency to control the fulfilment of their desires. Individuals in these societies perceive that their actions are restricted by social norms and often feel that indulging themselves is morally inappropriate.

Overall, the UK and Bangladesh differ significantly in their cultural dimensions, reflecting their different histories, values, and social norms. These differences can impact various aspects of business and communication, and it is essential to understand and adapt to these cultural nuances to succeed in cross-cultural interactions. (Hofstede, 2023)



Figure 1. (Hofstede Insights, 2023)

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is crucial when doing business in Bangladesh, as it is a country with a distinct cultural and social identity. Failure to understand and respect local customs and traditions can lead to misunderstandings, offense, and ultimately, unsuccessful business dealings.

One example of the importance of cultural sensitivity in Bangladesh is the concept of "face" or "prestige" in business dealings. In Bangladesh, maintaining personal honour and dignity is highly valued, and losing face can have serious consequences. Therefore, it is important to be polite, respectful, and avoid any behaviour that could be seen as rude or disrespectful. For example, using a condescending tone or interrupting someone during a conversation could cause offense and damage the business relationship. (Wahab, 2021)

Another important aspect of cultural sensitivity in Bangladesh is the role of religion in society. Islam is the dominant religion, and it influences many aspects of daily life, including business practices. For example, during the month of Ramadan, many Muslims fast during the day, which can affect work schedules and business hours. (Nahar and Zaman, 2017)

Additionally, in a business context, Bangladeshis may ask questions that could appear personal to someone from a more individualistic culture, such as inquiries about one's family. However, asking about personal matters is a common practice in Bangladesh's collectivist culture and is meant to show friendliness and interest. (Wahab, 2021)

Gender roles and hierarchy are also important to consider in Bangladesh. Men are traditionally seen as the primary income providers, and women may not always have the same level of authority in the workplace. (Karim *et al*, 2018) While women are responsible to manage household matters and are typically not encouraged to move outside their homestead area. As a result, women's economic and social activities primarily centre around their home, family and children. (Asaduzzaman, *et al*, 2015) In organizational settings, there is an expectation for subordinates to receive instructions from their superiors, while superiors anticipate being acknowledged and updated by their subordinates. In business engagements, it might be crucial to directly communicate with organizational leaders in order to address concerns. When engaging with these leaders, it is vital to maintain a tactful and respectful approach, refraining from openly and explicitly challenging them. (Wahab, 2021)

Overall, cultural sensitivity is critical when doing business in Bangladesh, as it can have a significant impact on the success of business dealings. Understanding and respecting local customs and traditions, such as the concept of "face," the role of religion, and gender roles and hierarchy, is essential to building successful relationships and avoiding misunderstandings or offense. Business professionals who take the time to learn about and adapt to the local culture in Bangladesh are more likely to achieve success in their business dealings in the country.

Communication Barriers and Challenges

When doing business between the UK and Bangladesh, there are communication barriers and challenges that may arise due to differences in language, cultural norms, and business practices. Understanding these challenges and how to overcome them is crucial for building successful business relationships.

One major communication barrier between the UK and Bangladesh is language. The official language of Bangladesh is Bengali, while English is widely spoken in the business community. However, there can still be differences in communication styles and language proficiency that may affect business dealings. For example, English may not be the first language for some Bangladeshis, and they may have different accents or communication styles that can lead to misunderstandings.

Cultural differences can also pose communication challenges between the UK and Bangladesh. In the UK, direct and explicit communication is often valued, while in Bangladesh, indirect and implicit communication is more common. This can lead to misunderstandings in business dealings if one party is not aware of the other's communication style. For example, a British businessperson may be confused by the use of indirect language or subtle gestures in a negotiation with a Bangladeshi counterpart. (Commisceo Global Consulting Ltd., 2020)

Another challenge is the different business practices and etiquette between the UK and Bangladesh. For example, in the UK, punctuality is highly valued, and being late can be seen as disrespectful or unprofessional. In contrast, in Bangladesh, there may be a more relaxed approach to time management and being a few minutes late may not be seen as a big issue. This can cause tension and misunderstandings if one party is not aware of the other's expectations. (Commisceo Global Consulting Ltd., 2020)

To overcome these communication barriers and challenges when doing business in Bangladesh, it is important to establish open and clear communication channels from the beginning. Both parties should be aware of and respectful of each other's communication styles and cultural norms. It may also be helpful to have a bilingual interpreter or cultural consultant present to ensure that all parties understand each other clearly. By doing so, both parties can build successful business relationships and avoid misunderstandings that could damage the business dealings.

Communication Strategies and Recommendations

To enable a UK company to succeed in Bangladesh, it is important to implement appropriate communication strategies and other relevant recommendations. Here are some suggestions:

Establish a local presence: Having a local office or representative in Bangladesh can help a UK company to understand the local market better and build relationships with potential partners and clients. This can also help to establish credibility and trust with local stakeholders.

Learn the language: While English is widely spoken in the business community in Bangladesh, learning some basic Bengali can go a long way in building trust and respect with local stakeholders. Even just learning some basic greetings and phrases can help to establish rapport and show a commitment to the local culture.

Be culturally sensitive: Cultural sensitivity is crucial for building trust and respect with local stakeholders. This can involve understanding local communication styles, business practices, and etiquette. It may also involve adapting to local customs and traditions, such as dress codes or food preferences. (HSBC Group, 2022)

Establish clear communication channels: Clear and open communication channels are important for building trust and avoiding misunderstandings. This can involve using bilingual interpreters or hiring local staff who are familiar with the local culture and language. It can also involve using technology to facilitate communication, such as video conferencing or instant messaging. (Deresky, 2016, p. 175)

Build relationships: In Bangladesh, building relationships is an important part of doing business. This may involve spending time socializing with potential partners or clients outside of work hours, such as over a meal or at a cultural event. It can also involve building trust over time through repeated interactions and follow-up. (HSBC Group, 2022)

Conduct market research: Conducting market research to understand the local market, consumer preferences, and competition is crucial for developing successful business strategies. This can involve hiring local consultants or conducting focus groups with local consumers. (Institute of Export and International Trade, 2017)

By implementing these communication strategies and recommendations, a UK company can increase its chances of success in Bangladesh. Building trust and respect with local stakeholders through cultural sensitivity, clear communication channels, and relationship building can help to establish a strong foundation for successful business dealings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, doing business between the UK and Bangladesh requires a deep understanding of the cultural differences and business practices that exist between the two countries. While there are some similarities in terms of language and legal systems, there are also significant differences that can pose challenges for successful business dealings. Cultural sensitivity is crucial for building trust and respect between the two parties, and this can be achieved by establishing open and clear communication channels, being aware of and respectful of cultural norms, and having a bilingual interpreter or cultural consultant present if needed. (Ferraro, 2002) It is also important to recognize and address the communication barriers and challenges that can arise due to language proficiency, communication styles, and differences in business etiquette. By doing so, businesses can build successful relationships that are mutually beneficial and avoid misunderstandings that could damage the business dealings. Ultimately, the key to successful business dealings between the UK and Bangladesh lies in establishing trust and respect through effective communication and cultural sensitivity.

UK companies may face both opportunities and challenges when doing business in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's growing economy and large population make it an attractive market for UK businesses seeking to expand their global reach. However, navigating the country's unique cultural and communication landscape can be a significant hurdle. To succeed in Bangladesh, UK companies should consider establishing a local presence, learning the language, being culturally sensitive, establishing clear communication channels, building relationships, and conducting market research. By doing so, UK companies can effectively communicate with their Bangladeshi counterparts, build trust and credibility, and tailor their products and services to meet local needs.

It's important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to doing business in Bangladesh, and UK companies should be prepared to adapt their strategies based on the specific cultural, social, and economic factors at play. However, by following the communication strategies and recommendations outlined above, UK companies can increase their chances of success in Bangladesh's dynamic and rapidly growing business environment.

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