

# CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVES ON CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING FOR INTERNATIONAL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

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Cross-cultural training has long been recognized as an effective method to facilitate cross-cultural interaction. Many global organizations provide cross-cultural training to their expatriates to increase productivity in international business. Cross-cultural training can significantly contribute to the success of international construction projects. It is critical in construction due to the increase in strategic alliances in this industry. Cultural training may also reduce the culture shock that people experience when entering a new culture. The research reported in this paper is a part of a wider study aimed at investigating the effects of cultural differences on construction projects. One of the specific objectives of this study was to examine construction professionals' perspectives on cross-cultural training for international construction projects. Within this context, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 53 construction professionals working in the New Doha International Airport Project. The researcher stayed in this project for 1 month for the purpose of data collection. The interviews took place over a 1-month period between April and May 2009. Based on the findings, all participants had never received formal cross-cultural training. The majority of the interviewees had gained cross-cultural skills through informal learning. Moreover, several recommendations are offered by the interviewees for cross-cultural training.

Keywords: construction professional, cross-cultural training, culture, expatriate, international construction.

## INTRODUCTION

Business has become increasingly international during the last decades. Therefore, the importance of culture and national cultural differences has become more critical for companies operating in international markets or having employees from different cultural backgrounds. Companies have to consider the cultural concepts in their daily businesses to operate successfully in the global marketplace (Kivrak *et al.* 2009).

According to Richardson and McKenna (2002), expatriates are professionals who are living in an overseas country on a temporary basis. In the global business environment, the number of expatriates continues to increase (Mervosh and

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McClenihan 1997). However, expatriates face challenges when working and living in a foreign country. These challenges are substantially greater than what they come across in the domestic arena (Choudhury 2001).

Many researches showed that there is a high rate of expatriate failure (Hurn 2007, Liu and Lee 2008). One of the main reasons for the failure is lack of cross-cultural skills to adapt to their new environment (Hurn 2007). Cross-cultural adaptation includes issues related to differences in culture and language, living conditions, and working harmoniously with co-workers with different cultural backgrounds (Yavas and Bodur 1999; Jassawalla *et al.* 2004). Besides costs, expatriate failures can also have negative effects on the image and reputation of the expatriates and companies (Hurn 2007). Thus, many companies operating in international markets have been looking for methods to improve the adjustment of expatriates to their new environments. To improve expatriate adjustment, researches have focused on two methods. The first is expatriate selection methods and the second is cross-cultural training (CCT).

CCT can help expatriates adapt to living and working in new environments (Forster 2000, Bhawuk and Brislin 2000, Eschbach *et al.* 2001). CCT can help expatriates to create realistic expectations with respect to living and working in the host country (Black and Mendenhall 1990). Like in other industries, the increase in strategic alliances in construction also increases the significance of cultural differences due to the interaction of people from different cultures (Shore and Cross 2005). Previous studies and experiences in the construction industry showed that cultural differences have an impact on daily businesses, either negative or positive (Murray-Webster and Simon 2004, Michailova and Hutchings 2006). It is also widely recognized that prior knowledge of a culture and its people is essential if successful interaction is to occur. In this respect, CCT can also significantly contribute to the success of international construction projects. The research reported in this paper is a part of a wider study aimed at investigating the effects of cultural differences on construction projects. One of the specific objectives of this study was to examine construction professionals' perspectives on CCT for international construction projects.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING**

Tung (1981) defined CCT as “any intervention aimed at increasing an individual’s capability to cope with and work in foreign environment”. CCT has also been defined as “formal methods to prepare people for more effective interpersonal relations and job success when they interact extensively with individuals from cultures other than their own” (Brislin and Yoshida 1994). The objectives of CCT are to teach members of one culture to interact effectively with members of another culture, improve functional skills and to minimize “culture shock” for the expatriates during international assignments (Harrison 1994). Culture shock can significantly affect the performance of the expatriates and consequently the performance of the company (Hall and Jaggar 1997). The term culture shock was introduced by Oberg (1960) and defined as the period of anxiety before an individual feels comfortable in a new culture that is different from their own. Oberg (1960) described four stages of adjustment: the honeymoon stage; the culture shock stage; the adaptation stage; and the mastery stage. Many studies have found positive correlations between CCT and a reduction in participants’ experience of culture shock, adjustment in the host country, and improvement in their performance on the job (Black and Mendenhall 1990, Bhawuk and Brislin 2000, Eschbach *et al.* 2001). Despite the importance of CCT, previous studies have shown that CCT provided by most international organizations is

neglected, insufficient or incomplete (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl 2009, Hutchings 2003, Selmer 2000).

CCT can involve many techniques and methods. It can include seminars, lectures, video films, workshops, experiential exercises, coaching, culture assimilators, and formal qualifications. Tung (1981) identified five different training programmes as didactic training, culture assimilator, language training, sensitivity training, and field experience. Gertsen (1990) proposed a typology of training methods and identified two kinds of training as conventional training and experimental training. In conventional training, information is transmitted through a unidirectional communication whereas in experimental training the trainer gets the trainees to participate by simulating real life situations (Waxin and Panaccio 2005). Then, according to Gertsen (1990), the training can focus either on the notion of culture in general or on one specific culture (Figure 1).

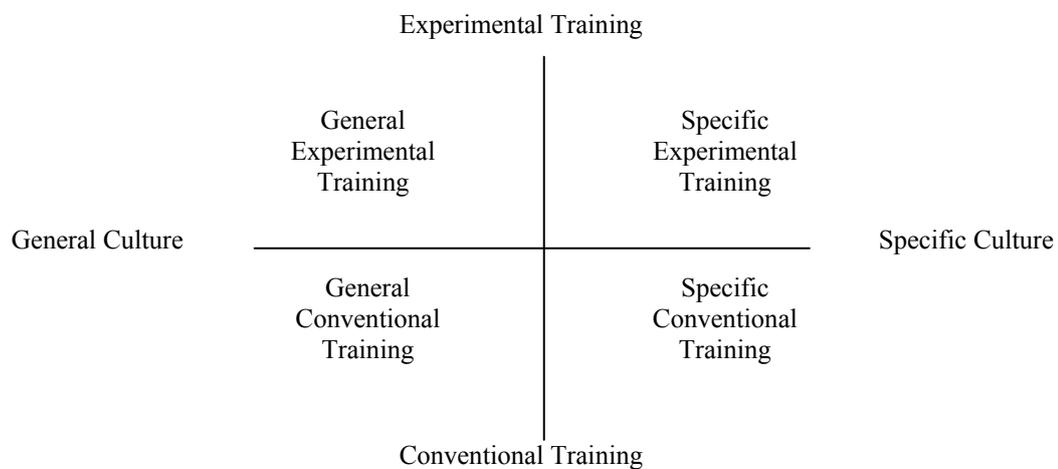


Figure 1: Gertsen's typology of cross-cultural training methods

Similarly, Gudykunst *et al.* (1996) stated that the type of CCT method should be selected as either a learning approach (didactic vs experiential) or an approach that focuses on the content (culture-general vs culture-specific). There is no one type of training programme that is determined as the most effective method.

Pre-departure training is the traditional form for CCT (Selmer 2010). Post-arrival training is another type of CCT that can be carried out in the host country after the arrival of the expatriate. Selmer *et al.* (1998) stated that CCT should be sequential, starting at pre-departure and continuing to the post-arrival phases. They recommended sequential training that can enhance the efficiency of CCT.

## METHOD

The research reported in this paper is a part of a wider study aimed at investigating the effects of cultural differences on construction projects. One of the specific objectives of this study was to examine construction professionals' perspectives on CCT for international construction projects. The study was carried out in the New Doha International Airport (NDIA) project in Qatar. The researcher stayed in this project for 1 month for the purpose of data collection. Data collection methods included semi-structure interviews and participant observations.

NDIA will handle 50 million passengers each year. The passenger terminal complex of NDIA is being constructed by the Sky Oryx Joint Venture that is formed between a

Turkish and a Japanese construction company. They are large-size companies and have been operating in the international market.

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. It was aimed to provide enhanced understanding and generate rich descriptions of the concept of cultural training. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 53 construction professionals from the Sky Oryx Joint Venture. The interviews took place over a 1-month period between April and May 2009, and each lasted approximately 1 hour.

The participants were chosen through purposive sampling. More than half of the participants (28 out of 53) were Turkish professionals whereas 8 interviewees were Japanese professionals. The remaining participants were from a number of countries including the UK, the USA, Germany, Egypt, Philippines, Greece, Jordan, South Africa, New Zealand and India.

Open-ended and literature derived questions were asked to each participant during the interviews.

- What do you think why professionals get a culture shock when moving abroad.
- What types of training did you receive from your firm.
- What type of cross-cultural training did you receive before starting work.
- What are your recommendations for future preparation of expatriates.

The questions were strongly shaped by the probing questions to seek further details. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data collected were coded and analyzed using content analysis, based on guidelines provided by Gillham (2000) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Content analysis was completed with computer assistance using the software programme NVivo 2.0. This programme was selected for its powerful data codification and data searching capabilities. Finally, emerged themes from the data were identified and they are reinforced with actual instances from the transcripts.

Little attention has been given in the literature to the analysis of CCT provided to Turkish expatriates. Thus, this study has potentials to contribute to the CCT literature, particularly in the Turkish context.

## **STUDY FINDINGS**

During the interviews, each participant was asked to provide some personal information such as educational background and professional experience. Based on the analysis, almost half of the participants (49%) have more than 10 years' of experience in international construction. Approximately half of the interviewees (46%) have more than 15 years' of experience in the construction sector. The majority of the participants (71%) have a Bachelor of Science degree whereas 24% have a Master of Science degree. Almost half of the interviewees (49%) were civil engineers and 15% were architects.

### **Culture shock**

Approximately half of the participants indicated that they experienced a culture shock before. Seven categories emerged from the analysis of the data: lack of experience, language differences, lack of motivation, personality/mentality, lack of cultural training, lack of company support, and different value systems.

#### *Lack of experience*

The majority of the participants mentioned that previous overseas experience can help expatriates to prevent culture shock. They stated that the possibility of getting a

culture shock will be less if the expatriates have adequate experience in overseas projects and working with people from different cultural backgrounds. Participants having previous experience in international projects stated that these experiences to a certain extent have facilitated their adjustments in their new environment. This finding is in accordance with the literature. Anderson (2001) found that previous overseas experience of expatriates had helped them to adjust to their new environments. Similarly, Waxin and Panaccio (2005) showed that international experience facilitates cross-cultural adjustment.

#### *Language differences*

One significant theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was language differences that can affect the adjustment of the expatriate. The interviewees expressed the importance of using the common language between the project team members. Ineffective use of common language was stated as one of the main reasons for conflict and thus, can lead to problems for the expatriates. As one manager reported.

*'I got a culture shock. The problem is the language. We still have the language problem. It is not easy to manage 4-5 thousand people. They have language problems'.*

On the other hand, host country language skills were also considered as a crucial factor in rapid adjustment. This finding is consistent with the literature. Some authors suggest that language skills are more important than ever in reducing uncertainty in the new environment (Osman-Gani 2000), and sending out positive signals of interest and willingness to the host nation employees and business partners (Forster 2000).

#### *Lack of motivation*

Some participants mentioned lack of motivation as a critical issue for culture shock. They indicated that expatriates should have the necessary motivation to reduce the possibility of culture shock. According to some of the interviewees, lack of motivation in performing necessary job-related activities is a more critical issue than international experience or language differences for experiencing culture shock. Motivation is also linked with personality/mentality that is presented in the following category. As one manager commented.

*'It depends on how focused you are and what you want to achieve. If you don't know why you are here then of course. I don't think there is a lot of culture shock for those who are serious. For those who are experts who are coming from abroad. For them it is nothing'.*

#### *Personality/mentality*

Almost one-third of the participants reported that expatriates' personality and mentality are significant factors for culture shock. According to these interviewees, flexibility, optimism and enthusiasm can help expatriates to adjust in their new environment. The participants recommended that companies should select expatriates carefully, based on their personalities and their ability to adapt to foreign cultures, in addition to their technical problem-solving skills and knowledge. This finding is also in accordance with the literature (Jassawalla *et al.* 2004).

#### *Lack of cultural training*

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that CCT can prevent culture shock. Thus, lack of CCT seems to be a major issue that causes culture shock. This finding is

consistent with many previous studies (Bawhuk and Brislin 2000, Eschbach *et al.* 2001).

#### *Lack of company support*

According to most of the interviewees, company support plays an important role in preventing culture shock. The support includes pre-departure trainings, post-arrival trainings, providing necessary skills training to adjust in the new environment, and providing social activities. Previous studies showed that social support is one of the contributing factors on the expatriates' success (Forster 2000).

#### *Different value systems*

People can live together in harmony with different value systems. However, these differences can cause serious conflicts. Most of the participants highlighted this issue during the interviews. Differences in life styles, social life, foods, and traditions were mentioned as important factors to get culture shock.

### **Cross-Cultural Training**

The participants overwhelmingly expressed the need for CCT. However, despite the importance of CCT, it was found that all participants had never received formal CCT. Four categories emerged from the analysis of the data: training, language training, pre-departure training, and post-arrival training.

#### *Training*

Based on the analysis of the data, all of the interviewees had never received a structured CCT. However, some of the participants reported that their firms provided them some kind of technical trainings. The interviewees reported that these trainings were focused mainly on project and company information, health and safety training, and job responsibilities.

The majority of the interviewees stated that they had gained cross-cultural skills through informal learning. The informal ways of learning were reported as learning from internet, learning-by-doing approach (Black and Mendenhall 1990), learning from books and learning from colleagues. However, all of the interviewees highlighted the importance of a formal approach for gaining necessary cross-cultural skills. Thus, it is crucial for the companies to provide a formal CCT for their expatriates.

#### *Language training*

Language training is rarely provided by most of the international companies. During the interviews, almost all of the participants expressed the need for language training. Like CCT, none of the interviewees received language training from their firms before. The participants reported that miscommunication is one of the main problems during their day-to-day business in the project. Certain terms can have different meaning in different languages. Therefore, they highly recommended language training that includes language of the project. They also indicated that such training should include non-verbal communication. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Hurn 2007, Forster, 2000) in which language training was highlighted as an important step for better communication with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Some authors argue that CCT is more important than language skills (Zakaria 2000). However, language training should not be neglected since language skills become more important in today's global business environment.

*Pre-departure training*

All of the participants agreed on the necessity of a formal pre-departure training. The participants reported the importance of this kind of training due to the interaction with project team members having different cultural backgrounds. They stated that CCT is required especially when the respective cultures are more diverse from each other. For example, Turkish expatriates indicated that there was a need to have some knowledge of Japanese culture prior to arrival to accelerate the adaptation period. Moreover, they also mentioned the need for having prior information about the host country culture. As one manager noted.

*'It is necessary before the start of the project. I have to know what they are dealing with or what they expect from the other side. Particularly if it is a JV, you have to understand the mentality. There are some human factors which has to be considered'.*

Many of the participants recommended pre-departure training a few weeks before departing. The interviewees focused mainly on specific trainings that provide training on one specific culture. Most of the participants stated that information about different cultures in real-life situations can be a good method to gain information about these cultures. Therefore, when considering Gertsen's (1990) typology of cross-cultural training methods, illustrated in Figure 1, it can be stated that most of the interviewees recommended 'specific experimental training' as the effective training method. This finding is consistent with many previous studies (Waxin and Panaccio 2005) in which specific and experimental trainings were highlighted as better training methods.

*Post-arrival training*

Post-arrival training has potential impacts on the performance of expatriates (Selmer *et al.* 1998). The majority of the participants highlighted the need for training after the arrival and during the international assignment. Most of them focused on continuous training about cultural issues. They reported that cross-cultural skills can be facilitated by training not only at the preparatory stage but also during international assignment. Thus, it can be said that sequential training, proposed by Selmer *et al.* (1998), was considered as a vital method for CCT by most of the participants. Like in pre-departure training, for post-arrival training the interviewees focused again mainly on specific and experimental training. These findings are in parallel with many previous studies (Selmer 2010, Gudykunst *et al.* 1996). As a result, most of the participants prefer sequential and specific experimental training.

Some of the interviewees indicated that self-learning about the culture should also continue during the international assignment. This finding also correlates well with previous studies (Eschbach *et al.* 2001).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Culture has the potential to impact on the success of international construction projects. Thus, companies have to consider the cultural issues in their daily businesses to operate successfully in the global marketplace. Understanding, respecting and accepting different cultures are key issues for managing projects successfully when doing business with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The increase in globalization will make CCT more important to gain competitive advantage. However, companies generally neglect to provide any kind of CCT to their expatriates. This study is based on interviews with construction professionals working in the NDIA project. In this study, construction professionals' perspectives on CCT

for international construction projects were examined. This research supports findings in existing literature. The analysis of the interviews showed that despite the importance of CCT, there is a lack of a structured CCT programme.

The companies operating in the international market should not perceive CCT as a useless expense. CCT can reduce the time to adjust in the new culture and reduce culture shock which can affect the productivity of the expatriates. According to the analysis, besides pre-departure training, post-arrival training should also be provided to the expatriates. As a consequence, CCT can be sequential to ensure successful completion of the expatriate assignment.

CCT can be provided by the construction companies or private firms. It can focus on values, morals, ethics, business practices, negotiation styles and project language. An effective CCT programme can provide several advantages for the expatriates. On the other hand, poor or inadequate trainings can be one of the reasons for culture shock.

Technical competence should not be the only selection criterion of the expatriates. Besides technical competence, the companies should also focus on personality traits in expatriate selection to increase the possibility for better cross-cultural adjustment. Moreover, based on the analysis, specific experimental training can be more beneficial for the expatriates. Language training should also be provided to improve communication.

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