

CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT ON BRITISH CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS PRACTICING IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Steven Ian Moore¹ and Abbas Elmualim²

¹ *Gardiner and Theobald LLP, London, UK.*

² *School of Construction Management and Engineering, University of Reading, PO Box 219, Reading, RG6 6AW, UK.*

The unique nature of construction means that the cultural dimension is arguably more important for this industry than any other. It is apparent that culture and more importantly, cultural difference, have the potential to be key influences in international construction operations and more than likely, to the success or failure of international construction projects. This paper explores the challenges faced by British construction professionals as a direct result of cultural difference and discovers if overcoming these challenges is a key part to the role they adopt. It transpired that there was an extremely limited source of established research material available on the subject of United Kingdom expatriate construction project managers operating in the United Arab Emirates. This absence of substantial research material necessitated the employment of qualitative research in the form of first hand data derived from project managers that had previously operated or were currently operating in the United Arab Emirates. Research conducted suggests that cultural difference does impact on British project managers; fundamentally, these impacts affected key project management competencies crucial to international effectiveness and this led British project managers to alter their approaches in order to operate effectively. It is apparent that there is a very real shortage of cross-cultural training afforded to British construction project managers. The provision of such knowledge and preparation, even if minimal, for the influential cross-cultural and organizational differences that they can expect to encounter when they are sent to the United Arab Emirates, could assist them with the successful delivery of international projects.

Keywords: cross-cultural training, culture, project manager, United Arab Emirates.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the differences which arise between domestic and international work come from social and cultural issues arising from the different traditions of peoples and nations where the work is located (Mawhinney 2001: 76). The unique nature of construction means that, the cultural dimension is, arguably, more important for this industry than any other. "Culture pervades every aspect of the procurement and production process and is new and different for each project ... with the increasingly global nature of the industry, the added dimension of national culture is taking on an ever greater importance" (Hall and Jagger 1998: 60).

² a.a.elmualim@reading.ac.uk

It is apparent that culture and more importantly, cultural difference have the potential to be key influencers in international construction operations and more than likely, to the success or failure of international construction projects. Therefore researching, highlighting and understanding these cultural variations must be a key concern for British construction professionals when considering and physically operating abroad, especially in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where cultural differences such as language, religion and environment are clearly apparent. As international economies develop and potentially lucrative foreign markets emerge, it is inevitable that British organizations and British construction professionals will make considerable efforts to claim their share of the proverbial pie. This has become all the more likely following the recent slow down in the UK construction market, with construction companies endeavouring to spread the risk of their market exposure and exploit stronger markets with the potential for greater longevity.

This study seeks to evaluate the cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates using the exemplary situation of the construction industry; in order to understand the impact that these differences have had on British construction professionals such as project managers, and how these impacts affect the ways in which they work. More importantly, this paper seeks to evaluate how important these cultural differences are to British project managers working in Dubai and Abu Dhabi (two of the UAE major Emirates) and if they create difficulties for the management of construction projects.

DISCUSSING CULTURE

There are numerous concepts of culture and equally, there are various topics, processes, applications and differences that make defining the subject extremely hard; Jenks (2005) stated that 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. The term culture is widely understood. However, as noted above, it also has multifaceted meanings. It can relate to the shared attitudes, goals, struggles, successes and practices that characterize a community or nation; it can relate in a progressive sense as the process of learning, the structure of belief systems and behavioural traits that are engendered in a particular society; or in a very different context the term can relate to social classification or status, in a way that is driven by taste and preferences for 'the arts'. One reoccurring feature of culture that appears clear from the above is that it is borne and exists in a social environment. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) believe that there are a number of layers to culture that can be established at a national, regional, gender, generation, social class and organizational level. The layers that appear crucial to this study of inter-cultural relationships within international construction project management are organizational culture and national culture. Modern day social and cultural anthropologists see culture in a similar manner, since they view culture as a form of shared pattern theory or learned behaviour. Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit ... acquired and transmitted by symbols [words, gestures, pictures, or objects recognized by those who share the culture], constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups ... culture systems may, on one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963: 181).

National Culture

Further to Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) identification of various cultural layers, when the subject of culture is reviewed in terms of international management and international construction, it is also generally referred to in the context of national

culture. The invention of nations, political units into which the entire world is divided and to one of which every human being is supposed to belong-as manifested by her or his passport-is a very recent phenomenon in human history (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). The culture of one of these individual nations can be defined as, 'the values and attitudes shared by individuals from a specific country that shape their behaviour and beliefs about what is important' (Robbins and Coulter 2005: 89). Robbins and Coulter (2005) suggest that just as it is clear that organizations have their own individual culture, the same is true for a country. But what is it that provides a country with this national culture? Different countries have different institutions: governments, laws and legal systems, associations, enterprises, religious communities, school systems, family structures. Some people, including quite a few sociologists and economists, believe these are the true reasons for differences in thinking, feeling, and acting between countries (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005).

Robbins and Coulter (2005) developed a supposition surrounding what might be most important to a manager, national culture or organizational culture. They refer to research conducted by IBM, which concluded that, as influential as organizational culture might be on managerial practice, national culture is even more influential. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) developed a renowned framework for assessing cultures, which was designed to assist managers with understanding differences between these influential national cultures; his research included the study of both the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates (generalized as the Arab World). The framework established that employees and managers vary on five dimensions of national culture:

- Individual versus Collectivism: individualism is the degree to which a country has a preference to act as individuals. In an individualistic environment people are expected to look after their own interests and those of their immediate family. The opposite of this is collectivism; this is an environment where people prefer to act as part of a group in which they feel they 'belong' and which they feel are there to look after and protect them.
- Power Distance: this dimension was used to describe the degree to which society accepts that the power in families, institutions and organizations is distributed unequally; a high power distance society accepts wide differences. Status carries a lot of influential weight. This dimension is very similar to that of Handy's (1993) Role Culture.
- Uncertainty Avoidance: this dimension describes the degree to which people tolerate risk and have a preference for a structured over unstructured environment; a society with low uncertainty avoidance accepts risk and is tolerant of differing opinions and behaviour. A society with high uncertainty avoidance feels threatened by uncertainty and experience anxiety. This dimension is very similar to the research of Deal and Kennedy (2000) surrounding risk.
- Masculinity: masculinity describes the degree to which the values of men and women undertaking the same role differ and how the distribution of roles between men and women differs.
- Long-term and Short-term Orientation: this dimension describes a country's orientation toward life and work. Long-term orientation cultures look to the future, and value thrift and persistence. Short-term orientation values the past

and present with emphasis on the respect of tradition and fulfilling social obligation.

Although Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) framework appears to have been the most widely adopted assessment tool, others have been developed. The most notable of these is the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) framework. The GLOBE framework established eight dimensions under which national culture is assessed, many of which bear a strong similarity to the dimensions developed in Hofstede's earlier framework:

- Assertiveness: this dimension describes the degree to which society encourages people to be tough, confrontational, assertive, and competitive versus modest and tender. This dimension is akin to Hofstede's (2009) quantity of life dimension.
- Future orientation: this dimension describes the degree to which society encourages future-orientated behaviours such as planning, investing in the future and delaying gratification. This dimension is very similar to Hofstede's (2009) long-term and short-term orientation dimension.
- Gender differentiation: this dimension describes the degree to which society maximizes gender role differences determined by the status and decision-making responsibilities women have.
- Uncertainty avoidance: as in Hofstede's (2009) dimension of the same title, this dimension describes the degree to which people tolerate risk and have a preference for a structured over unstructured environment.
- Power distance: akin to Hofstede's (2009) dimension of the same title, this dimension was used to describe the degree to which society accepts that the power in families, institutions and organizations is distributed unequally.
- Individualism/collectivism: as in Hofstede's (2009) dimension of individualism versus collectivism, this dimension was used to describe the degree to which a society prefers to act as individuals or groups.
- Performance orientation: this dimension describes the degree to which society encourages and rewards group members for improvement and excellence.
- Humane orientation: this dimension describes the degree to which society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, generous and caring to others.

Organization culture

Cameron and Quinn (2005) distinguished four dimensions of organizational culture, 'the four clusters of criteria, in other words, define the core values on which judgements about organizations are made' (Dainty *et al.* 2007: 190-191):

- The clan culture: a friendly place to work; management are seen as mentors. The organization is formed around tradition and commitment is high. Success is defined in terms of sensitivity to customers and concern for people. Teamwork is promoted.
- The adhocracy culture: a dynamic, creative place to work; management are innovators and risk takers. The organization is formed around innovation. Success is defined by growth and the acquisition of new resources. Individual initiative is promoted.

- The hierarchy culture: a formalized, structured place to work; management are efficient coordinators. The organization is formed around stability, performance and long-term focus. Success is defined by dependability, smooth operation and low costs. Employee security is promoted.
- The market culture: a results orientated place to work; management are hard drivers and demanding competitors. The organization is formed around success and winning. Success is defined by market share and penetration. Hard driven approach and competitiveness is promoted.

Robbins and Coulter (2005) suggest that there are seven dimensions that determine an organizations culture. By analysing and appraising an organization on these seven dimensions it is possible to gain a developed understanding of an organization's culture. They note that in most organizations, one of the dimensions is played out more than the others and it is this crucial difference that determines the personality and focus of the organization and its members.

The cultural recipe of construction

'The construction industry incorporates a wide range of occupations involved in the construction and maintenance of the built environment', it is 'an important contributor to the world's economy, both in terms of its proportion of gross domestic product and its role as an employer' (Dainty *et al.* 2007). Construction also 'covers a wide range of products, services and activities' (Mawhinney, 2001 30) that extend further than just the related site, design activities and building material products that most simple definitions seem to focus upon.

The construction industry is characterized by its nature as a project-based structure (Loosemore *et al.* 2003), fragmentation (Latham 1994 and Egan 1998), workforce homogeneity and a procurement system which hampers innovation (Elmualim 2010). 'Analysis of problems and failures of multinational business abroad has shown that the first dominant factor is culture' (Miroshnik 2001).

CROSS CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Background of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE stands as a model of success in a region fraught with misunderstanding, corrupt institutions and political scaremongering. Two factors have thrust the union of the Emirates into the world consciousness: first, the speed with which the country has emerged from humble beginnings as a modern global citizen and, second, the reliance of that transformation on the strength and vision of a single man, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. It will be interesting to investigate how the Arab and Western worlds collide in this undeniably successful, emerging market. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of a federation of seven emirates which include Abu Dhabi (capital state), Dubai (largest city), Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. It is located in the Southeast of the Arabian Peninsula in Southwest Asia on the Arabian Gulf, bordering Oman and Saudi Arabia. In 1820 the area of the UAE signed up to The General Treaty of Peace with the British and became known by the name of the Trucial States. In 1892 an agreement was signed that meant that the area would not have any resident agent other than the British. In 1968 the British withdrew from the Gulf and due to the resultant security vacuum in the area, in 1971 the United Arab Emirates were officially formed.

On official formation in 1971, the UAE created the Constitution of the United Arab Emirates, in principle this was its own set of laws modelled on Egyptian, Sudanese and Jordanian, where French and British law had already been assimilated with the principles of Shari'a law. The predominant religion in the UAE, as in much of the Arab world, is Islam. As such, the UAE is a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which has 57 state members and acts as a collective voice to the Muslim world. It is second in size only, to the United Nations. The organization seeks to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world by promoting the spirit of international peace and harmony between all people. The UAE's major industries are oil, gas, petrochemicals, manufacturing and most importantly to this study, construction.

METHOD

The absence of substantial research material necessitated the employment of qualitative research in the form of first hand data derived from project managers that had previously operated or were currently operating in the United Arab Emirates. First hand information is crucial in ascertaining the differences that they encountered between their home culture in the United Kingdom and those of the United Arab Emirates, and also to evaluate the impact that they believe these variances have had on their ability to carry out their role as a project manager. Following extensive research into the variety of research methodology available, qualitative research was selected on the basis that it, 'produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about... social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations' (Strauss and Corbin 2008, 11).

A face-to-face questionnaire interview allows for a relaxed environment conducive to the development of conversation and discussion. Interviews were recorded using a digital dictaphone rather than minutes being rigorously taken by hand. This will allow the conversation to flow in a free manor and for responses to be reviewed for analysis following the interview. The interview candidates (Interviewees A, B and C) were approached to participate due to their suitability for the study, as all three are British project managers, working for British companies and have operated or are currently operating in the United Arab Emirates (Dubai and Abu Dhabi). The interview questions were as follows:

- Question 1: introduction of interviewee (name, company, position, professional role and location of operation).
- Question 2: interviewees understanding of factors that attribute to their competency at undertaking their professional duties.
- Question 3: interviewees definition and understanding of culture.
- Question 4: interviewees understanding of the cultural differences that they have experienced.
- Question 5: interviewees perception of the impacts that those cultural differences raised in Q4 have had on their ability to carry out their professional duties in a competent manor.
- Question 6: interviewees perception of the competencies, methods and attitudes that are subsequently required in order to manage with the effects of cultural difference and perception of competencies, methods and attitudes that are counter productive to managing the effects of cultural difference.

- Question 7: interviewees expectations of the differences in working in the United Arab Emirates and description of training offered and afforded prior to relocation abroad.
- Question 8: interviewees recommendations to United Kingdom employees and employers regarding working practices in the United Arab Emirates

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to the understanding of culture and organizational culture, each of the interviewees provided very similar responses when asked to give their understanding of culture. All three interviewees offered relatively simplistic definitions of culture. This is in contrast to the complex descriptions outlined by academics and scholars for example Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). The notion that culture is extremely difficult to define is also questionable because the responses gained, although straightforward, are correct in their disposition. All three interviewees were then asked to elaborate further and give their understanding of organizational culture. It seemed evident that at organizational level they began to relate to this at a more personal level with references to relationships and conduct.

In response to the question about the understanding of the United Arab Emirates Culture, interviewee A immediately notes that the culture they experienced in the United Arab Emirates is very different to that of the United Kingdom. The Islamic religion is noted as being a key contributor to the cultural environment but they add that wealth also appears as a cultural influence. Interviewee A believes that the mix of nationalities that reside in Dubai also has a defining quality to the national culture. Interviewee B infers that the United Arab Emirates has a confused cultural identity. They note, as my earlier research suggests, that the country is very keen to uphold and retain its cultural heritage but that they believe that this is conflicting with its process of modern development. Similarly to Interviewee A, they describe the religion as having cultural influence and note that the impact is one of strictness; the legal system also compounds this sense of regimental rule. As do Interviewees A and B, Interviewee C describes the United Arab Emirates as very religious. They also identify a cultural clash where east meets west. Akin to Interviewee A, Interviewee C describes a cultural mix where numerous nationalities converge together. They also describe the culture as one with ambition; this is generalized as a long-term orientation, as identified by Hofstede (2009). The three interviewees provided slightly different interpretations of the culture in the United Arab Emirates, but the most prolific of these were religion and the hierarchical mixture of differing cultures.

Interviewee A and B were in agreement that there is an inherent, hierarchical class system surrounding numerous different nationalities in Dubai. They also remark, that social status and nationality impacts on an individual's political and legal influence. They further infer that this leads to rudiments of corruption by commenting that United Arab Emirate nationals are less likely to be charged with motoring offences than foreign immigrants, and even go as far as to suggest this treatment of the class structure as racism. Religion and in particular, Muslim faith are noted as having cultural significance inside and outside of the workplace; foreigners are expected to display sensitivity to the Islamic faith. Interviewee B also touches on the tendency of Emirates to work to a set structure in meetings. This is unsurprising due to their suggested preference for uncertainty avoidance. Interviewee B suggests that United Arab Emirate nationals have let cultural preservation take precedence over the use of their language. Emirates are also described as inflexible to outside intervention

instead of suggestion and are also prone to shift their judgement, even once a decision has been reached. Similarly to Interviewees A and B, Interviewee C also describes the intrinsic social hierarchy of the United Arab Emirates, in Abu Dhabi. Interviewee C explains that they have experienced a reactive culture where decision-making is last minute and formalized only when it needs to be. It is evident from the responses received from all three interviewees that they all had similar experiences and understanding of the United Arab Emirates' culture. Language and religion were both touched upon as being clear cultural dividers, but most crucially to this work, was their identification of a significant difference between the culture of the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. One attribute that is consistently appears is the hierarchical class system and it is evident that it is integral to the way that the society operates and plays-out.

The impact of the religion and legal system is described as contributing to a bureaucratic society where matters are prolonged due to red tape and rubber-stamping measures. A concerning implication is the disparity of treatment between nationalities in the legal system. Interviewee B displays a lack of trust in the legal system, which must surely breed social insecurities. However Interviewee B's flippant remark regarding having an accident involving a car with a number plate of only three characters means you should leave the country, gives the impression that social inequality and the influence of high power-distance are accepted even by Westerners. Interviewee B explains about the increased importance of stakeholder relations in the United Arab Emirates and an increased awareness of making them feel involved, even if only superficially. This is a likely result of the national desire for hierarchical control and respect. All of the Interviewees note differences between the treatment of men and women in terms of professional construction employment, especially in the position of project manager. Interviewee B notes that female consultants are not very common and those that they do know only work for Western companies; plus they either have a similar Arabic background or beneficial cultural advantage such as being able to speak the Arabic language. Interviewee C also states that none of the female construction professionals that they work with are British. Evidently all three interviewees have experienced the impact of cultural difference and unfortunately they have not found it to be positive or beneficial.

All of the interviewees listed communication as a key professional competency and they also noted that it was one of, if not the, most important skill required when working outside the United Kingdom. However, all three interviewees commented that the cultural environment of the United Arab Emirates negatively affected communication. They noted that communication difficulties affected teamwork and the development of relationships; both of these elements (teamwork and relationship building) were raised as further key competencies to a project manager.

The use of language as a barrier has also evidently been used by Emiratis in meetings to demean individuals and also by local authorities to slow and confuse the process of negotiation. This would prove frustrating both on a personal and professional level, and through prolonging process, could subsequently have an impact on project milestones and deadlines. Interviewees A and B suggest that the construction industry is poorly regulated and aspects such as health and safety are not as diligently scrutinized as they are in the United Kingdom. This obviously poses safety risks and concerns for a professional that they would not usually have to consider to such a great extent. In addition, they would normally have the backing of powerful legislation and executive bodies to help enforce standards. This also affects other

competencies raised, such as experience and intuition because the foundation on which they were learnt in the United Kingdom would be different in an unregulated and therefore irregular environment such as the United Arab Emirates. It is evident from the interviewees that female project managers are limited in their numbers and that they are very unlikely to be from Britain. This gender disparity not only affects numbers but Interviewees B and C explain that women find it initially harder to get accepted and that it would be extremely difficult for a female project manager from the United Kingdom to reach positions of senior authority in an Arabic company. The issue is compounded at site level because none of the Interviewees worked with any female colleagues who orchestrated works on site; Interviewee C had come across a greater number of females in his client advisory role than when based on site.

Cultural expectations versus realities experienced in the UAE

All three interviewees describe that the cultural reality they experience / experienced operating in the United Arab Emirates is similar to what they had anticipated. The interviewees all state that their reasons for making the move to the United Arab Emirates were based on career, lifestyle and economic factors. The prospect of a better work / life balance is also a contributing factor that Interviewee C describes that they had been promised and subsequently expected.

Recommendations for the international project manager and international consultancies operating in the UAE

Surprisingly none of the interviewees were offered any form of cultural training prior to, or during their international employment. This is one aspect of Human Resource Management that I find surprising to have been ignored or overlooked by two large, international construction consultancies. Interviewee B recommends that companies should offer training but is equally unconvinced that it would offer valuable benefits that could not be better acquired through experience. Finally, Interviewees B and C, warn of the need for long-term personal employment planning because there are now risks associated with the sustainability of the economic and developmental future of an area that is so heavily loaded with speculative development in a time of recession. Mixed with this, Interviewee C makes it clear that individuals looking to work in the United Arab Emirates should accept that they will never be considered true residents and will remain considered as visitors to a foreign country.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to seek to evaluate the cultural differences between the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates, in order to understand the impact that these differences have on British construction professionals such as project managers and the ways in which they work. More importantly, this study sought to evaluate how important these cultural differences were to British Project Managers working in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and whether they create difficulties for the management of construction projects.

This study has established that cultural identity is vast, complex and multifaceted. It has recognized that cultural theory is conceptualized through a variety of different layers, and that of these layers, national and organizational culture emanate significant influence on international project management. Recognized study and analysis into the concepts of both national and organizational culture ascertains that the two layers are not identical phenomena and are actually of very different natures. It is argued that if British project managers are afforded some knowledge and preparation, even if

minimal, for the influential cross-cultural and organizational differences that they can expect to encounter when they are sent to the United Arab Emirates, then they will operate more effectively. They would take with them a greater awareness, increased respect and heightened sensitivity and this could consequently have the potential to help alleviate the impact of cultural difference, foster collaboration and aid sound project delivery.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, K and Quinn, R E (2005) *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture based on the competing values framework*. Jossey-Bass, John Wiley and Sons.
- Dainty, A R J, Green, S and Bagilhole, B (2007) *People and culture in construction: a reader*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Deal, T E and Kennedy, A A (2000) *Corporate cultures: the rites and rituals of corporate life*. Perseus Books Group.
- Egan, J (1998) *Rethinking construction: the report of the Construction Task Force to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, on the scope for improving the quality and efficiency of UK construction*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Construction Task Force.
- Hofstede G (2009) *Cultural Dimensions*. ITIM International. <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/> [accessed 26/05/09].
- Elmualim, A A (2010) Chapter 11: Culture and leadership in stakeholder management. In: Chinyio, E A and Olomolaiye, P (Eds.), *Construction Stakeholder Management*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 174-192.
- Hall, M A and Jaggard, D M (1998) The importance of cultural differences to British construction professionals working internationally. *Proceedings of the 14th ARCOM Annual Conference*, University of Reading, September 1998. Vol 1. 60-68.
- Handy, C (1993) *Understanding Organizations*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hofstede, G and Hofstede G J (2005) *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jenks, C (2005) *Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Kroeber, A and Kluckhohn, C (1963) *Culture: a critical review of concepts and definitions*. London: Vintage Books.
- Latham, M (1994) *Constructing the team: final report of the government/industry review of procurement and contractual arrangements in the UK construction industry*, London: HMSO.
- Loosemore, M, Dainty, A R J and Lingard, H (2003) *Human resource management in construction projects: strategic and operational approaches*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Mawhinney, M (2001) *International Construction*. London: Blackwell Science.
- Miroshnik, V (2001) Culture and international management: a review. *Culture and International Management*, 521 [accessed 25/05/09].
- Robbins, S P and Coulter, M (2005) *Management*. 8th ed. Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Strauss, A L and Corbin, J M (2008) *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.