MANAGING ENGINEERING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS: MULTICULTURALISM AS A KEY-ELEMENT OF THE PROJECT MANAGER'S TALENT

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The goal of this paper is to expose the converging point of the results obtained in two parallel studies conducted over a period of five years (2012-2017) by Romanian and Lebanese doctoral students, in Romania and abroad. Specifically, the paper aims at presenting that multiculturalism is a key-element while: (i) implementing successfully engineering and technical assistance (E&TA) international projects by increased project portability; and (ii) selecting and retaining talented project managers by properly calculating the universal talent score (UTS). Although, the portability concept and UTS are two significant original contributions brought by the doctoral studies mentioned above. The implications are important for both theorists and project management practitioners.

Keywords: engineering & technical assistance (E&TA) international projects, project management, project portability, project managers, talent management, universal talent score (UTS), multicultural teams, multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

The dominance of the project-related decisions is increasingly a stable trend at the top of large companies and their management.

As more and more companies are concerned by the better use of pricier resources (because of their scarcity) and, on the other hand, by the time-pressured fierce competition, the project-based managerial approach seems to be the correct answer to both questions generated by this trend (at all levels but mostly at the top management level). Another observable global movement is the proliferation of technical assistance and development international projects (mostly addressed to emerging economies and distressed regions) – characterized not only by ambitious objectives and long durations but also by large budgets and significant impacts on

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multiple levels – consequently asking for top expert and professional project management.

On top of these, the internationalization of project activities and management creates the auspicious background not only for multicultural and intercultural cooperation but also clashes, disagreements and even conflicts. Therefore, it is not surprising that scholars and practitioners alike are concerned by various issues that emerge while managing the technical assistance international projects.

The principal goal of this paper is to expose the converging point of the results obtained in two parallel studies conducted over a period of five years (2012-2017) by Romanian and Lebanese doctoral students, in Romania and abroad: (i) "Contributions as regards the influence of cultural factors on the implementation of engineering and technical assistance (E&TA) international projects" [1] ; and (ii) "The fusion and integration of knowledge and talent management: The development and implementation of a universal talent score (UTS)" [2] .

Specifically, the paper aims at presenting that multiculturalism is a key-element for (i) successful implementation of engineering and technical assistance international projects by increased project portability; and (ii) selection and retention of talented project managers by properly calculating their universal talent score.

Consequently, the remaining of the paper is structured accordingly, in a balanced mix of theory and practice, existing and novel concepts and approaches, as follows: project portability (from the stand point of engineering and technical assistance international projects); talent management (from the standpoint of the project manager's position); both to converge in emphasizing the key-role of multiculturalism while recruiting and retaining suitable project managers, in order to avoid intercultural clashes, and successfully manage the engineering and technical assistance international projects. The paper concludes with significant recommendations addressed – but not limited – to this particular type of managers (project managers) and projects (E&TA international projects).

2. Project portability – from theory to practice

Knowing that every project is a special experiment, though technologies, researches, studies, market analysis, plans and procedures may be used similarly in several implementations the replication of successful experiences and use of lessons learnt should decrease both risks and costs of projects through a relative standardization of preparatory and design stages, leading to economies of scale [3] . This capacity of projects to be replicated is identified as portability, a term that has been previously used to denominate a special characteristic of insurance and

pension plans to move from one system to another maintaining the conditions for beneficiaries.

Nowadays the migration of phone numbers between providers is also named portability, or the access to personal settings in the cloud technology.

The project portability concept best fit to E&TA international projects that strive to multiply positive experiences by transferring technologies, plans, procedures in new environments. Examples depicted from steel and oil industries illustrate the standardization, partial or total, of processing facilities located in the vicinity of the ores (*Figure 1*). Similarly, international donors replicate successful projects to support disadvantaged groups through archetypal promotion of entrepreneurship, or environmental and health awareness projects.

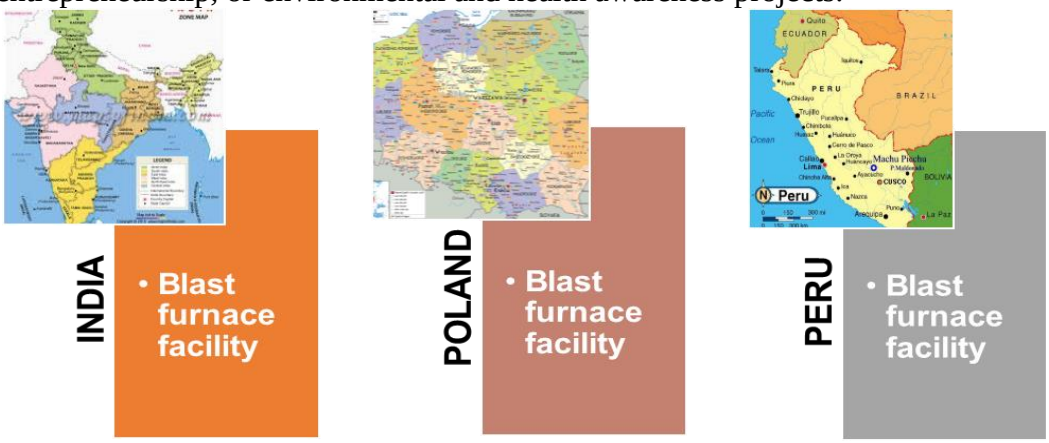


Fig. 1. Portability of projects

Generally, the preparatory phases commonly count as sunk costs, yet they ensure prevention of delays and additional costs due to later changes and adjustments ([4] [5]). Portability or replication of projects represents a way to diminish costs of changes due to accidental, unforeseen events in the course of implementation, mainly from a technical standpoint as risk of cultural clashes still remains [6] . Complex projects need not only complex design but project managers, eventually team members, with special competencies, knowledge and skills, attitudes and behaviors in line with the field and objectives of the project, and also with the environment in which the projects are carried out ([4] [7] [8]).

Implementation of E&TA international projects involves four significant parties: (i) the owner of the project or the implementing organization who sets objectives and affords necessary resources, establishes plans, decides rules and takes the risks, being the leading partner, therefore directing behaviors and values; (ii); the project manager for whom the selection criteria includes beyond the professional expertise and experience in the specific field, multicultural experience; (iii) the team members chosen or trained to respond requirements; (iv)

the host community, whether beneficiary or not, is sometimes less known in terms of cultural specific, therefore a potential threat.

Since portability covers replication of technologies, know how, procedures, plans and budgets the main variables remain the human factors and under the circumstances it is important that the project managers understand both internal and external shareholders [9] , not only from economic, political and social points of view, but also from a cultural perspective since sometimes the needs of a group are seen through cultural lenses like the case of restrictions regarding blood transfusion during surgery.

One study identified that about 90-95% of management challenges call for soft skills [8] which underlines the importance of cultural awareness as organizational changes are often more difficult to absorb than technological ones [10] . Cultural factors reflect the human nature (the individual mental software), the cultural traits (local traditions, mental programming of groups), and personality (personal, individual programming based on inherited human nature and learnt cultural traits), and are accountable inputs in the planning of international projects ([11] [12] [13]). Statistics show that many IT projects fail due to the poor management of cultural diversity exactly in the area in which it should add value [14] .

Portability, a cultural relocation, focuses on the influential cultural factors and on the compatibility between the cultural profiles of the four partners as prerequisites for the success of a project. For this purpose the authors suggest a dedicated instrument, namely the cultural profile radar of a project, with four plans, one for each project partner (implementing organization, project manager, project team, host community), and eight cultural dimensions for each individual profile. The selection of these cultural dimensions, described in the specific literature, emerged as being relevant from the experience and works of the authors ([15] , [16]), and from a survey including information from more than 150 E&TA international projects.

I. Monochronic vs. polychronic dimension reflects the perception of time in different cultures, from linear to cyclical orientation. Monochronic cultures consider time a scarce resource and plan activities in successive sequences, while polychronic cultures have less concerns regarding time and undertake simultaneous jobs ([17] , [18]). Cooperation between partners with different chronemics may lead to poor completion of tasks.
II. High context communication vs. low context communication describes the cultural tendencies of people to share details, to use innuendoes, symbols, references to known stories, diluting thus the information. Through low context communication people transfer clear, objective, strict information ([17] [19] [20]). Communication between people with extreme approaches may be difficult and hampering the completion of tasks.

III. Tolerance to incertitude is a cultural dimension measuring the capacity of people to accept diversity, change, unpredictable situations ([11] [21] [22] . Since projects present, by definition, an important degree of uncertainty, it is recommended that people are prepared to accept such environment.

IV. Multicultural experience is more a characteristic dealing with the knowledge and skills of individuals, being important in connection with the tolerance to incertitude and mandatory in the case of international projects ([23] , [24]).

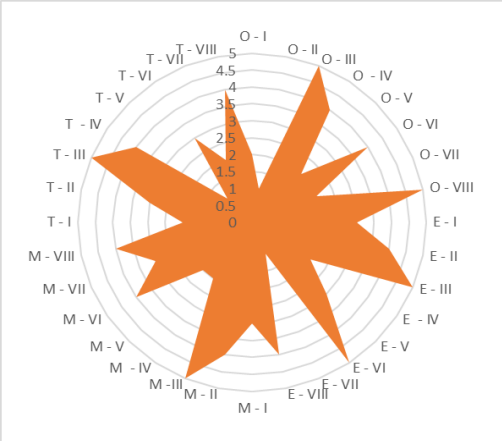
V. Individualism vs. collectivism describes the relationship between group members, the level of mobility and integrations ([11] , [25]). Together with the tolerance to incertitude this cultural dimension allows risk evaluation and prediction.

VI. Emic – etic continuum refers to the perspective of people regarding their appurtenance to a group, the concentration of local own values as standard or acceptance of more general, global behaviors and concepts ([26] , [27]). Tuning perspectives between project partners helps avoiding conflicts and waste of resources.

VII. Distance to power is a cultural dimension that characterizes the capacity of sub-ordination to a certain level of authority and possible unequal distribution of power ([12] , [26]). Denial of authority has a negative role on the team cooperation and possibility to complete jobs.

VIII. Learning interest, capacity and desire is a cultural and personal characteristic that facilitates the knowledge transfer, the execution of plans and procedures. Since projects generally represent change it is mandatory that partners are open to adopt new approaches and procedures.

These eight cultural dimensions are parts of the four cultural profiles of the four partners involved in the project implementation (*Figure 2*): implementing organization, team members, project manager and host community. Compatibility and similarities are means towards reducing risks in terms of cultural conflicts.



I. High - Low Communication
II. Tolerance to incertitude
III. Multicultural experience
IV. Monochronic - Polychronic
V. Individualism - Collectivism
VI. Etic – Emic
VII. Distance to Power
VIII. Learning Interest

O Implementing Organization
T Team members
M Project Manager
E Environment / Host Community

Fig. 2. Cultural profile radar

Together, *the four cultural profiles of the partners represent the cultural profile of the project*. A visual representation of this project cultural profile has four sectors, one for each partner (O, T, M, E), and in each sector (I, II, …, VIII) – as presented in *Figure 2*.

Alternative representations of the cultural profile radar are more appropriate for the comparison of the four cultural profiles rather than for the cultural profile of a project, and these may be used in the planning and design stages of initial projects (*Fig. 3. Cultural profile radar – areas representation*).

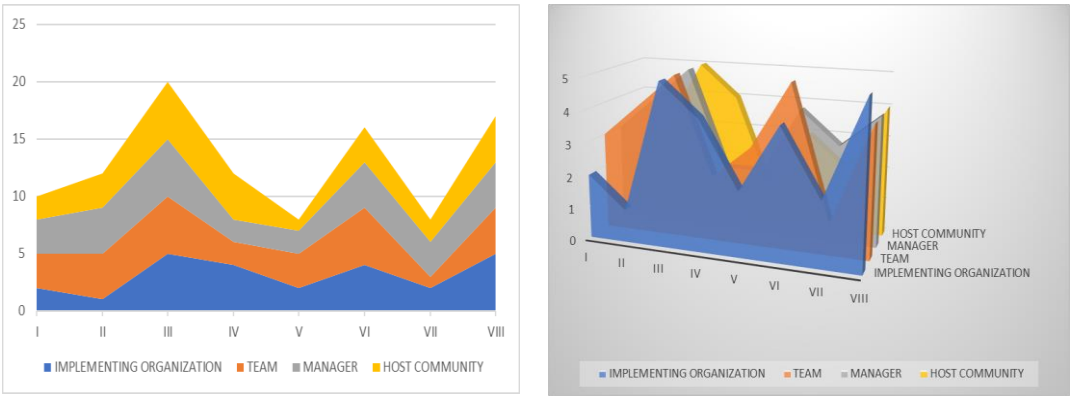


Fig. 3. Cultural profile radar – areas representations

In the analysis and design phases of the project, along with the market studies, budgets, schedules, should be defined risks factors (including cultural ones) together with mitigation plans, and communication strategies. Being aware of cultural diversity the implementation organization may avoid conflicts, delays or additional costs.

The cultural analysis conducted by the implementing organization may reveal incompatibilities between project partners, but, the first concern being the profile of the community in which implementation takes place.

The identification of important cultural gaps usually determines the implementing organization to sketch special profiles for the project manager and team members, design special training programs and communication plans addressing the host community.

In-depth analysis of the cultural profiles leads to identification of cultural incompatibilities that may become failure factors, allowing implementing organization to design mitigation strategies and plans. However, the importance of multicultural experience dimension is critical in order to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and potential conflicts, and to create favorable premise for successful portability and implementation of international projects (E&TA projects in particular).

The implementing organization may be proactive by the help of project managers and teams that have to liaise with the host community whose cultural profile is often times unknown, therefore the multicultural experience remains one of the key factors (*Table 1*).

Table 1

Cultural dimensions and elements of the cultural profile radar

E&TA projects		Project implementation partners			
		Implementing organization	Project manager	Team members	Host community
Cultural dimensions	High-low communication	Communication planning	Communication skills	Communication skills	Tradition
	Tolerance to uncertainty	Anticipation, planning	Adaptability	Adaptability	Acceptance
	Multicultural experience	Lessons learnt use	***Project manager's multicultural experience***	Multicultural experience	Openness
	Monochronic-polychronic	Planning procedures	Time management	Time management	Openness
	Individualism-collectivism	Motivation system	Team leader	Team worker	Acceptance
	Etic-emic	Cultural vision	Cultural intelligence	Cultural intelligence	Cultural tolerance
	Power distance	Planning procedures	Discipline	Discipline	Acceptance
	Learning interest	Flexibility	Willingness to learn	Willingness to learn	Acceptance

3. Talent management – from theory to practice

Citing a survey completed by *Aberdeen Group* [28] , Abi Abdallah [29] underlines that "more than half of the respondents to their survey still operate a reactive, emergency-driven recruitment [so called] strategy", which directs her to recognize the need for a more coherent talent strategy. As result, after studying specialized literature ([30] [31] [32] [33] [34]), business cases, and practical examples of successful companies in managing talent, she identifies a number of tactics that support a comprehensive talent strategy, known as the *talent bait* strategy.

Using a two-dimension matrix {potential, performance} and "the 9-box talent grid" ([35] [36] [37]) to analyze the talent, Abi Abdallah [38] has conducted a survey at International School of Oman (in 2015), and has also developed the associated "talent map".

Based on the positive results obtained, the author has extended the model of talent map to four dimensions {performance, potential, personality,

qualifications} – in order to develop a method to calculate a "universal talent score (UTS)" [39] . The four dimensions are actually four groups of parameters (75 as a total, *Table 2*) – which were selected following a consistent survey of the literature related to talent management ([39] [40] [41]).

Table 2

The talent parameters – by talent dimensions

Dimensions of the talent	Performance	Potential	Personality	Qualifications
The talent parameters	Adaptability	Achievement drive	Accountability	Achievement awards
	Analytical / Reasoning	Conflict resolution	Amiability	Communication skills
	Competition	Creativity	Anger management	Computer / IT skills
	Connectedness	Decision making	Command	Education / Degrees
	Consistency	Dependability	Dedication	Industry awareness
	Critical thinking	Development	Emotional intelligence	Languages
	Discipline	Effectiveness	Empathy	Leadership position (held)
	Executive	Entrepreneurial	Honesty	Numeracy skills
	Flexibility	Futuristic	Integrity	Professional appearance
	Focus	Ideation	Intellection	Professional certificates
	Multitasking	Individualization	Leadership	Professional memberships
	Optimization	Initiative taking	Loyalty	Special trainings
	Organizing	Maximization	***Multicultural awareness***	Technical skills (industry-related)
	Planning	Negotiation	Politeness	Volunteer work
	Presentation	Passion	Positive attitude	Work experience (industry-related)
	Problem solving	Premeditation	Self-confidence	
	Professionalism	Research skills	Self-image	
	Sales skills	Strategic planning	Self-motivation	
	Teamwork	Tenacity	Significance	
	Time management	Willingness to learn	Stress management	

The UTS calculation method requires ex-ante estimation of the respective parameters' weights (for each type of position and industry they are different, and their valuation involves expert assessment, by various techniques [40] .

It is behind the goal of this paper to go into this type of detailed mechanisms (definition of all parameters, software specifications and design, etc.). It is only to highlight that – as part of one of the author's research [2] – out of several positions investigated, that of *project manager* is of particular interest for this paper. Nevertheless, preliminary research indicates a significant weight of the project manager's *multicultural awareness* UTS parameter (*Table 2*).

4. Multiculturalism: the key-element while managing engineering & technical assistance (E&TA) international projects

The focus of this paper is on multiculturalism: (i) as "multicultural experience" dimension in the larger context of portability concept while analyzing E&TA international projects (case of the first doctoral study [1]); and (ii) as "multicultural awareness" parameter, within personality dimension of the talent – in case of the second [2].

In other words, the two doctoral studies have a common intersection point, which is "multiculturalism". They reach – by separate research paths, using both secondary literature (theoretic) research and primary practical research, and, notably, developing new concepts and models (*project portability* and *universal talent map*) as well as practical instruments (*cultural profile radar* and *universal talent score*, respectively) – to convergent conclusions:

(i) *Project manager's multicultural experience* is a key cultural dimension on the cultural profile radar (*Table 1*) – in order to succeed in E&TA international projects implementation by higher degree of *portability*;

(ii) *Project manager's multicultural awareness* is a key parameter of the talent dimensions (*Table 2*) – in order to succeed in attracting and retaining talents with higher *universal talent score.*

5. Conclusions

The article, gathering two independent studies, presents a common conclusion namely the importance of multicultural managerial dimension, offering practical instruments to a variety of organizations.

The main conclusion of this parallel study is, likewise, clear managerial implication as well as strong recommendation.

The recommendation is equally addressed to two categories of professional practitioners: the human resource professionals involved in talent identification, selection and promotion (specifically talented managers of engineering and technical assistance [E&TA] international projects) as well as project managers themselves involved in such projects. To note that recommendation is addressed – but not limited – to this particular type of managers (project managers) and projects (E&TA international projects).

The paper also opens research paths for theorists on the key-role of multiculturalism, at the intersection of two neighboring areas of management studies: human resource management (specifically: *multicultural awareness*) and project management (specifically: project manager's *multicultural experience*). For increased accuracy and applicability further studies and analyses are recommended.

The authors exposed the development of several original concepts related to the management and implementation of E&TA international projects (*project portability* and *cultural profile radar*) as well as couple of practical tools that supported their studies: the *talent map* which led to introducing a method for the calculus of *universal talent score* (UTS). These tools are correspondingly recommended to be used by professionals in the above mentioned areas of interest.

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