
Factors for the success or failure of international teams

Factors for
international
teams

The special case of international research projects

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Introduction

Developing truly international academic research means bridging more than an ocean. One must bridge languages, theoretical paradigms, methodological traditions, and different styles of analysing and reporting empirical results. The rewards are as apparent as they are difficult to achieve. However the traps guarding these values are hidden and varied. Some are counterintuitive and others are just good common sense. Elsewhere in this special issue other researchers will discuss with clarity and depth many of the principal problems that international academic research projects (IARP) face. The purpose of this article is to discuss the requirements and necessity of international research as well as to provide a checklist of practical issues that need consideration early in the conceptualisation of the research project.

Requirements and necessity of international research

Even the most casual bibliographic studies of the social science subjects encompassed in the Academy of Management and other similar academic organisations indicate that international research is the exception rather than the rule. This should be very disturbing, since it appears well established that some factor(s) associated with national culture lead to differing values and/or actions in individuals and groups. The omission of a controlling cultural variable severely limits both the generalisability and scientific value of this research. It would be useful therefore to establish some baseline requirements to merit the title, international.

The first requirement should be a sample representative of a global population. The studies of Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1993) for instance do not meet this requirement. One was conducted entirely within a single organisation while the other is based on upper-level managerial training participants. The Globe project, the Best International Human Resource Management Practices Project, and the Cranfield project are more explicitly international. One might start a multi-country study with the intention of expanding it to international dimensions thus earning the international label. But a convenience sample with a couple, even many, different country samples should not automatically be considered international.

A second requirement should be a project goal and methodology conceived and agreed on by an international team of researchers. This would normally exclude even carefully thought out research designs that are created by a single culture team of researchers. It is necessary to diminish the danger that the researchers' frame of reference ignores other important, culturally related factors. A problem with this requirement is that a strict interpretation demands that a study's designers represent the target sample even when the study will start at a regional level. Both of these requirements are very demanding. Certainly they will not be met easily due to cost and time issues.

The previous three paragraphs are intentionally polemic and are suggestive of the types of "back to the first step" conversations that are normal in international, multi-disciplinary research teams. They represent good points for which there are no easy responses. Never-the-less one must proceed even when the path is neither clear nor certain to succeed. The following advice, gleaned from the collective experience of the symposium participants, is presented in this spirit.

The management of international research teams

Checklists glorify simple management but are abhorred by most academics. It is therefore with considerable reluctance that the following advice is offered. For the serious scholar they can be used as a quick reminder of some basic points one often forgets during the excitement of project creation. Some will be basic and self-evident. The fact, however, that an international panel of researchers considered them important enough to mention should be an immediate indicator that even the mundane has an important role in the management of international academic projects.

Developing a research plan

Be sceptical of following the established international leaders. Reductionism has often been the goal and result of past multi-country research. But so much is lost in the attempt to meet word limits and other publishing considerations that valuable, insightful knowledge is lost. One way to avoid the reductionistic tendencies of modern research is to build a research design based on multi-method techniques. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods and multiple indicators offers more ways to analyse the resulting data and provides a richer database. This in turn helps to attract a wider variety of possible partners. Greater academic and national diversity can reduce the cognitive distance between team members. The caveat here is that the project team must adopt an egalitarianism that sometimes is difficult to manage when team members hold different professional status levels. Graduate students may hesitate to question a senior professor from a respected foreign university even when their insights may be much more accurate.

Choice of partners

Other than an unlimited budget, there is probably no single more important factor than having good international partners. Counter-intuitively, senior professors generally do not make the best partners. They do have better access to funding and other resources but are often deeply engaged in their own projects or administrative duties. They may hand off the work to junior colleagues or students so that direct contact with the actual researchers or coders is difficult. The best partners often have skills and goals that are complementary to the project team. This helps to create a mutual dependency that nurtures commitment. To meet the strict definition of international research each team must have national and academic diversity. The benefit will diminish the problem of groupthink. A problem that should be especially worrisome for a project team is the professional time schedules of the team members. Be very cautious about accepting younger members who face dissertation or tenure deadlines. If the project falls behind schedule they may be forced to scale back their involvement to manage their own careers effectively.

Type of commitment

Among certain European universities there is strong institutional support for joining international research projects. It is a strategic necessity to build a strong European identity and it helps to signal the internationalisation of a school and its all important business school. The positive implications of this are access to funds for meetings, research assistance, and conference presentations. The negative side of this is that institutional commitment does not necessarily lead to personal commitment. The resources of some European schools are allocated more along reputational characteristics than on objective results. To the surprise of some, objective results are not always the basis for reputational achievements. It is obviously necessary to evaluate very carefully the personal needs and commitment of your international research partners. Determining the institutional and personal needs of the team partners can offer ways to enhance commitment. A visiting professorship post, a book chapter, an important introduction, helping a partner find a school or summer job for his children are all among the inexpensive rewards available to most professors.

Communication

Average speakers of English speak words too fast for an international audience. It is difficult to break one's normal rhythm, so your partners will lose some of the meaning. Unfortunately, one is never certain exactly what information was not transmitted. Providing written summaries may not necessarily solve this problem because the precision necessary to clearly explain research plans is often filled with jargon and can be itself unclear. About the only solution is constant repetition and vigilant verification of all work in progress. Complement this with a group moderator. The role of the moderator is not necessarily to join the conversation but rather to monitor and manage it. The

role can be fixed or rotating but it needs to be established. Without it meetings will be much less productive.

Advice useful for mother tongue speakers of the group's working language is to resist correcting misinterpretations. One might expect that this simple gesture will help the group but in fact it can be very irritating and dysfunctional. Let the members work out their respective meanings with a minimum of help. A final admonishment; never let language ability be an indicator of professional academic competency. The two are probably totally unrelated.

Project leadership

Enlightened project leadership is without a doubt one of the skills most admired and desired among international academic teams. The project leader may be determined by professional or institutional prestige or by pre-existing resources brought to the research. If there is competition for the position it is necessary to remember the old theatre expression, "there are no small roles – only small actors". Having a small role in a big project may be much more rewarding than a big role in a small project. However the leaders are chosen, it is imperative that they work towards three principal goals. First, they need to advertise the project in such a way that it builds credibility within the international academic community. Few status conscious institutions or partners are willing to join and support projects that are not perceived to be important. There needs to be a bit of glamour or excitement behind the solid research design. Second, the leader often must accept the role of being the central communication point for the team. This will require constant and consistent communication policies. Large projects can be overwhelmed with communications[1] that if not well organised will quickly overwhelm the team. Third, the leader needs to concentrate on building a team and not an academic project. Insistence on every detail of the research being carried out "correctly" is the surest way to fail. Building a strong loyal team is the surest way to succeed.

Conclusion

Academics suffer, unjustly perhaps, from the reputation of being individualists unwilling to make the necessary compromises to work in teams. If this is true, there is little hope that international research will become the standard practice in social science and business research. This would be a great loss, not only to the development of knowledge in general, but also for their personal and professional development. Go find a team.

Note

1. The GLOBE project attempted to count their messages and stopped at 15,000.

References

- Hofstede, G.H. (1980), *Culture's Consequences*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.
Trompenaars, F. (1993), *Riding the Waves of Culture*, The Economist Books, London.