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The Antecedents Influencing Cross-cultural Communication Barrier among Expatriates in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose: The main aim of this study is to examine the determinants influencing cross-cultural communication barriers among expatriates working in Malaysia. Antecedents such as cultural differences (CD), organizational structure (OS), and communication style (CS) have been selected as the independent variables for this study.

Design/methodology: This quantitative study will focus on the expatriates working in Malaysia, particularly in the Selangor area. Questionnaires were distributed to the respondents using a seven-Likert scale and 70 questionnaires were consciously selected for the data analysis. The analysis of the study is using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Software.

Findings: This study concluded that all of the independent variables selected for this study have meaningful relationships with the communication barrier. Findings indicate that cultural differences (CD) has the most significant and positive effect on communication barrier.

Practical Implications: This study will add insightful empirical findings to the existing literature particularly in the context of emerging country. The results can help the managers and expatriates to overcome communication challenges and therefore can enhance the organizational performance.

Keywords: Communication Barrier, Cultural Differences, Organizational Structure, Communication Style, Expatriate.

Introduction

The expansion of multinational corporations and international businesses worldwide has raised the responsibility of managers to deal with cultural diversity as well as teams consisting of employees of different cultural backgrounds. As mentioned by Kilic and Saygili (2019), the most important organizational capital is the human factor. The differences in cultural values among employees can affect their working style and the way they communicate with their colleagues. According to Tenzer and Schuster (2017), the language-related barrier is often associated with international business activities since there are various local languages and a multinational workforce. Kittler and Faeth (2017) mentioned that expatriation is the process of the temporary relocation of individuals to a host country for work. Working in a multi-cultural atmosphere according to Huzynski and Buchanan (2010) has created challenges around cross-cultural communication as well as finding new patterns for communication. However, language-related barriers have been largely neglected since most companies more focus on work-related competencies in the selection of expatriates rather than communication skills and intercultural competencies (Suutari & Brewster, 2001).

The cultural effects on overall communication across borders and cultures are often overlooked. The lack of studies related to factors influencing expatriates' communication barrier led to inconsistent and inconclusive findings by previous researchers. The empirical findings for this study are also inadequate, especially in the Malaysian context. Hence, the findings of this study can assist the companies established in Malaysia with insights into communication barriers to expatriate performance. This study aims to examine the determinants of the communication barrier of the expatriates working in Malaysia such as cultural differences, organizational structure, and communication style. Through the analysis of the antecedents of communication barriers that affect expatriates of different cultural backgrounds and countries, the study intends to contribute to the empirical knowledge to assist companies in improving communication and eventually lead to a positive impact on the overall performance in the workplace.

Literature Review

Culture is the integrated sum of learned behavioral traits shared by members of a society (Deari et al., 2008). Culture does give an impact on communication style either in verbal or non-verbal communication. An organizational expatriate is a professional and skilled employee sent by a home organization to fill the position in the host country's subsidiaries. Mansor and Adnan (2014) mention that the vast demand for global talent has led more Multinational companies (MNCs) to increase the number of employees assigned abroad to host countries. Keyton (2011) mentioned that communication is necessary for the organization and also persistent throughout the organization's lifespan. Organizational communication can be defined as a social process that enables the continuous exchange of information and ideas between the departments and elements within the organization. Shockley-Zalabak and Hulbert-Johnson (1994) stated that organizational communication has a significant contribution to achieving the organization's goals and also sharing of information between managers and employees. According to Rahman and Hussain (2021), in a culturally diverse workplace or organizations such as Multinational Corporations where cross-cultural communication exists, a plethora of conflicts are related to cultural barriers.

Communication barriers are anything that hinders effective transmission and comprehension of information, thoughts, and ideas (Rani, 2016). Zorlu and Korkmaz (2021) mentioned that organizational communication barriers consist of factors arising from the employees' characteristics within an organization. When there is a language barrier, effective two-way communication becomes even more difficult. For instance, Milliman, Taylor, and Czaplewski (2002) indicate that culturally different managers (an American and a Malaysian) do influence the behavior, low context communication, and an expatriate's behavior. A study by Abdulai, Ibrahim, and Mohammed (2017) indicates that there was misunderstanding, misinterpretations, and misconceptions of verbal and nonverbal messages between Ghanaians and expatriate colleagues. Understanding the communication barriers as well as the social identity patterns of expatriates can help in determining their work performance. Rubin and Rubin (2011) stated that miscommunication will lead to inefficiency and make the collaboration challenging as well as low productivity. This is supported by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta (2005), subsidiaries of MNCs in non-English speaking countries do face difficulties in communicating with other corporate units, and employees who lack English skills may not be invited to attend key meetings and are eventually excluded from the decision-making processes.

According to Tian and Lillis (2010), the reinforcement of cultural differences between nations, regions, and ethnic groups can be observed. The communication obstacles in intercultural communication are determined by stereotypes towards other cultures and the attitudes toward cultural differences of employees in a company. Adler (2003) stated that cultural differences consist of the integrated and maintained system of socially acquired values, beliefs, and rules of conduct that impact the range of accepted behaviors distinguishable from one societal group to another. Macnamara (2004) stated that in the context of shared values that affect communication, words do not have the same meaning across languages and cultures. Intercultural business communication research draws heavily from intercultural communication and hence, it is tricky to deal appropriately with cultural differences without being seen as engaging in stereotyping (Lovitt, 1999).

According to Zorlu and Korkmaz (2021), the organizational structure is a framework for reporting relationships in an organization including the nature of an organization's leadership, various systems operating in it, as well as organizational culture. Zbirenko and Andersson (2014) stated that organization structure is a grouping of people and tasks into different units to boost coordination of communication, decisions, and actions. Differentiation and integration are among the two fundamental processes of organizational structure. Differentiation appears when a company becomes more complex and employees are specialized in their tasks while integration means the need to coordinate and combine the divided activities into a whole outcome. Therefore, through these processes, communication will take place and can lead to a communication barrier. For instance, some integration issues are caused by a high level of differentiation such as different cultural backgrounds, minimal communication between groups, and the department's priority toward goals. Zbirenko and Andersson (2014) also mentioned that if the organizational structure does not fit with environments, therefore, it will be unable to function at high levels of effectiveness and efficiency.

Zbirenko and Andersson (2014) stated that communication style is the way one verbally or para verbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood in a communication context. Communication means a process of delivering and accepting messages Adler (2003) with functions such as controlling, motivating organizational

members, expiring feelings and emotions, and providing information. These functions can impact the communication style in which an individual may not realize other people's communication style since he/she has his/her tendency towards communication style. Zorlu and Korkmaz (2021) also stated that communication style is a combination of many components such as voice patterns, eye movements, facial expressions, and body posture. The four basic communication styles are aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. Zorlu and Korkmaz (2021) stated that various factors lead to hurdles in communication such as individual factors, linguistic difficulties, inability to listen, lack of clarity of expression, as well as insufficient feedback. Barriers to cross-cultural communications include communication and thinking style. Hence, understanding and addressing communication styles is crucial in the workplace.

Methodology

This study is based on a quantitative data collection method. For the sampling design, this study adopts convenience sampling as its sampling technique. Primary data is obtained through the distribution of questionnaires. Questionnaires are developed and distributed to respective respondents working in the Selangor area. 70 questionnaires were carefully selected for the data analysis. There are five sections in the questionnaires using a seven-point Likert scale with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 for "strongly agree". Data collected was then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Software to obtain findings of descriptive, correlation, and regression analysis.

Findings

The findings of the data collected were analyzed and interpreted using SPSS. Among the questionnaires distributed, 70 questionnaires were selected which consists of 34 male and 36 female respondents from 10 countries. To summarize the demographic data of the respondents, most of them are from India with 27.1 percent followed by Singapore with 21.4 percent and the least is from the Philippines with 1.4 percent. Muslim respondent dominates with 31.4 percent, then Christian with 28.6 percent, and the least is others with 5.7 percent. The majority of the respondents are from 38 to 47 years old with 32.9 percent, and the least age range is 58 years old and older with 1.4 percent. Most of the respondents have been in Malaysia between 1 to 3 years with 47.1 percent and the least is more than 6 years.

Table 1

Descriptive Analysis

Variables	Average Mean
Communication Barrier (CB)	5.66
Cultural Differences (CD)	5.87
Organizational Structure (OS)	5.62
Communication Style (CS)	5.78

For CB, the highest score is for the question "Information is more effective sent through email rather than face to face" while the least is for the question "I receive information to do task directly from management". For CD, the highest score is for the question "I respect cultural values of my co-workers" while the least score is for the question, "Stereotype in cultural does influence the business communication". For OS, the highest score is for the question, "Organization will be productive if the information is delivered faster o employees" while the

lowest score is for the question, “All employees are given instruction to communicate with people of different backgrounds”. For CS, the highest score is for the question, “I encourage other people to talk, and ask appropriate questions” while the lowest is for the question, “I enjoy conversations and discussions that take place at the same time while doing another task”.

Table 2
Reliability Analysis

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Results
CB	8	0.831	Good
CD	8	0.780	Acceptable
OS	8	0.854	Good
CS	8	0.851	Good

Based on the findings above, all variables are represented with high Cronbach's Alpha results, hence these variables passed the test, and the result is considered reliable.

Table 3
Correlation Analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation	Significant (2-tailed)	Directional Analysis
CD	0.683	0.000	Moderate
OS	0.675	0.000	Moderate
CS	0.574	0.000	Moderate

By referring to Table 3, all variables are significant toward the communication barrier since the p-value shows the result of 0.000 with CD as the highest correlation score. This indicates that there are significant relationships between communication barriers with all the independent variables.

Table 4
Regression Analysis

Coefficient of Determination	Value
R-square	0.575

Based on the finding above, the R-square indicates the percentage variance in the dependent variable is explained by the variation in the independent variables. The result of 0.575 explains that 57.5 percent of the variance in the communication barrier (CB) while 42.5 percent of the dependent variable is explained by other variables that were not included in this study.

Table 5
Coefficient Table

Variables	Beta	t-value	Sig.	Results
(Constant)		0.777	0.440	
CD	0.440	3.877	0.000	Significant
OS	0.420	3.683	0.000	Significant
CS	-0.016	-0.127	0.899	Non-significant

Based on the table above, CD increases by one standard deviation, and CB increases by 0.440 of a standard deviation. OS increases by one standard deviation; the CB increases by 0.420 of a standard deviation. While CS increases by one standard deviation, CB decreases by 0.016 of

a standard deviation. Hence, this indicates that CD is the strongest independent variable as the magnitude of the corresponding standardized coefficient is the highest.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, cultural differences (CD) is the most significant variable to explain communication barrier, followed by organizational structure (OS) and communication style (CS). Cultural differences can influence the expatriates in terms of completing their tasks or interacting with other workers in an organization. Therefore, this indicates that the larger cultural differences will require stronger controls by the manager in an organization. A study by Ghasem and Bakhtiar (2017) agreed that organizational structure has a direct and positive relationship with ineffective communication. Hence, this supports the result of this study that indicates OS as a significant variable to communication barrier. Based on correlation analysis, communication style (CS) has a moderate relationship with CB probably due to the expatriates' different styles of communication can sometimes work. Nevertheless, adjusting own style to suit other employees can dramatically improve communication. The greater flexibility in the communication style, possible and actual conflicts can be avoided (Franksiska, 2006).

To combat the communication barrier in organizational structure, the creation of programs between employees and the organization is important so that the employees (expatriates) can be more confident to openly discuss with their employers (Bucata and Rizescu, 2017). Some government initiatives can be taken to enhance expatriate facilitation such as Talent Corp Foreign Talent Facilitation. The results of this study suggest that companies must understand the factors affecting communication barriers in the workplace. Companies can also be mindful of the cultural differences that affect their expatriates since the demand for expatriates keeps on increasing in Malaysia. Both policymakers and companies can collaborate to standardize the policies related to overcoming barriers among expatriates and realizing solutions that can be applied across countries. Communication is vital to organizational functioning.

Cross-cultural communication barriers can also be overcome by eliminating differences in perception, usage of simple language, reducing and eliminating noise levels, active listening, emotional state, simple organizational structure, avoiding the information overload, providing constructive feedback, proper media selection, and flexibility in meetings and targets. For instance, the information and communication through technology can make other cultures closer and therefore can overcome the cultural boundaries which can create an effective collaboration of cross-cultural boundaries and better understanding. An employee can become a global citizen by developing knowledge and intercultural communication skills since direct contact with co-workers from different cultures have become a norm in this globalized world. This study would suggest potential opportunities, particularly in future empirical research. Future researchers are recommended to include other independent variables in the framework as well as to get a larger sample size to obtain more representative results which will give a better scenario of the communication barrier experience by expatriates.

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