



Future-Based Consultancy & Solutions

international cooperation

**Language and cultural barriers in
international cooperation**

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The internationalisation of markets forces, large organisations and Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) to invest in new relationships which results in the need for collaboration. Unfortunately, especially in SMEs but also in large enterprises, the existing language skills are generally not on an advanced level and act as an obstacle in international environments. In an expanding Europe it no longer makes sense to treat problems from a single view or from a single culture if organisations want to be competitive. In addition, it is very rare that any organisation or country in the EU today can afford the costs and cover the know-how, capabilities and skills needed to master the complete range of a product development process or research topic. Partnering is essential to be able to compete and lead world wide. As this becomes more and more crucial, international cooperation is strongly needed and the language barrier problem has to be tackled to provide access to the knowledge society.

But it is not only the language that causes problems but also the cultural barrier that has to be taken into account when we discuss existing obstacles. It can though be stated that language and cultural barriers can inhibit participation in international collaboration and access to new labour markets.

Communication can be defined as interaction between at least two individuals that share as a basic need for collaboration the same objective or interest. Both of them have a certain set of characteristics that they bring into the interaction and which influence their behaviour. In order to communicate as effective as possible we know that a communication channel and a basic set of common concepts is needed. People that share the same culture, language norms and values, socialisation, political background etc are more likely to find a common understanding than people that don't share any of these concepts. It also makes a difference if a person speaks for himself or if he or she represents a group of people and has to address various interests. (Schulz von Thun 2001).

In addition a set of factors that are not directly related to the person, but that are settled more on an interactive level and based on experiences have to be taken into account.

These are: shared experiences (either positive or negative), physical distance, the hierarchical level between the correspondents, the expected return of investment and the size of the group. The picture below shows the whole framework and its interrelations.

The European knowledge management community KnowledgeBoard gives a good example for international and intercultural cooperation. The virtual community consists of more than 12,000 members from all around the world, who discuss various knowledge management topics on research and business level. Therefore they can use different discussion forums or read and publish articles on knowledge management. As the common language spoken on KnowledgeBoard is English the community gives a good example for a place where people from different cultural backgrounds discuss and share knowledge and experience. Various researches and business cooperation have been born through KnowledgeBoard. With a high number of active members, KnowledgeBoard shows that language must not be a barrier and that intercultural cooperation opens new ways and possibilities. KnowledgeBoard is an open space for the knowledge management community. It has been drawn as a kernel to link together different forms of communities coming from different schools of thought. Since the beginning, it involves academia, consultants and industrials. The richness of the community is based on the contents provided by each of the community members and the interactions they develop. It strongly benefits of its diversity in terms of culture and professional experience and can be seen as a good reference for successful international collaboration.

The platform offers the possibility to participate not only in Special Interest Groups (SIG) turning around a specific KM topic as for example around Communities of Practice or Project Management, but also in so called Zones either based on a certain language or a cultural zone and aim at providing the possibility of discussion with a limited number of participants.

At the same time there is always a link to the community behind, which makes the Zones become a springboard for wider participation.

For our research we have taken a closer look at 4 different communities on KnowledgeBoard, all with a different context and different levels of participation:

1- One zone with material and discussion in French, Dutch and English but with a focus on the KM community in a certain country. → **KM in Belgium**

2- One geographical zone, dealing with specific cultural related KM topics. These interactions are either in English or in the language of a particular country of this zone. The participants, from different countries, do not share the same mother tongue; however they have a common language. → **KM in Central Eastern Europe (CEE)**

3- One language zone, addressing a knowledge community speaking the same mother tongue and sharing the same cultural background while living in different countries. → **Zona de KM em Português (KM in Portugal)**

4- One Special Interest Group, in English language. This community is turning around a certain topic and is open for everybody interested in the topic and being able to communicate in English. → **KM for Project Management**

We have analysed the different Zones in order to find out, how they can contribute to an enhanced collaborative climate.

The following factors have been identified as crucial to overcome cultural and language barriers:

Creation of trust

One obstacle can be that people don't have enough confidence in their language skills. It can not be taken for granted that everybody is confident enough to communicate in another language, so this factor might inhibit them from making profit out of international collaborations. To enforce people to actively participate in discussions in an international environment they need to have trust in the team. The creation of trust is especially challenging in virtual environments as the team members mostly never meet face-to-face and stay quite anonymous. The facilitator of a virtual community can play an important role to create trust. If communication mainly takes place via a platform, he or she can control the comments that are made within the community and have an eye on the content of the discussions and the behaviour of the community members. KnowledgeBoard provides e.g. some general community rules and guidelines which help the members to share a common understanding on how to interact with each other.

Knowledge about cultural backgrounds

To understand people's point of view it is important to take their cultural background into consideration.

Let's meet on KMiB / KM in Belgium :
Knowledgeboard.com/open_groups/km_in_belgium/

KnowledgeBoard offers the simple but effective way of a members directory where each member can provide any personal information, that he or she wants. It is thus a vehicle to learn more about people's background which helps understanding the circumstances that lead to his/her specific behaviour.

Personal contacts

If two or more persons share a set of common understandings, experiences and interests this helps them to approach to each other and to overcome possible language and cultural barriers. A mixture of virtual and face-to-face contacts seems to be an advantage compared to pure virtual communication. It helps to overcome barriers in the way as face-to-face contacts allow getting access to a bigger set of characteristics of the conversation partners. Interpersonal relations can be strengthened through these meetings as a transmission of verbal and non-verbal signals is possible and the communicators get a more detailed impression of each other.

As stated by Watzlawick, one of the basic abilities in successful communication is to determine, which is the true major message of a signal; combining verbal and non-verbal communication. (Watzlawick 1967) Taking this into consideration, the importance in intercultural collaboration is not only to speak the same language but also to understand and respect people's cultural background. This allows us to get a complete picture of the personality and the character of a person and understanding the signals in the correct way. Sharing the same language in international environments can of course help to avoid misunderstandings but as language always involves culture it is necessary to go one step further and learn as much as possible about the background of the conversational partners. For enterprises, the demand to get involved in international and joint cooperation and projects gets more and more important and we can assume that the language and cultural barrier can become a problem for these enterprises or even inhibit them from an investment in international partnerships. It is as a first step extremely important that organisations are aware of the existing barriers in order to define steps how to overcome them and achieve a solid ground for international cooperation.

If we apply the results to a business perspective, we can conclude that the identified obstacles are very general in terms of applicable areas and though strategically important for enterprises when it comes to international cooperation. The proposed techniques can thus be adapted by enterprises to overcome language and cultural barriers. This means that during the cooperation process a maximum of common understanding between the involved parties should be achieved. It is not sufficient to understand each other on a linguistic level but also on the various other levels that we mention above.

This means that effort should be spent to learn more about cultural backgrounds and the influence of norms and values on the business process. It is crucial to be aware of language and cultural barriers to understand the origin of conflicts and misunderstandings and possibly avoid them. Whenever possible, face-to-face meetings should take place to offer the possibility of non-verbal conversation. Training on intercultural competencies should be part of the organisational culture, in order to make sure that most efficient results can be achieved.

Personal face-to-face contacts are a powerful tool to support the learning process as they enable non-verbal communication and provide conversational partners with a set of signals that he wouldn't receive in a completely virtual work environment. On a business level this means that in international collaboration at least a minimum of personal contacts should be assured to give all partners the possibility of getting insights in the other's attitudes and customs in order to avoid misunderstandings and to support the team building process.

We can thus summarise that the overcoming of language and cultural barriers can lead to a more effective and productive collaboration especially in virtual working environments. It demands sensitivity from the involved persons and openness towards different cultures.

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Rendez-vous sur **KMiB / KM in Belgium**
sur le site KnowledgeBoard :
Knowledgeboard.com/open_groups/km_in_belgium/

THE VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

The **virtual organization (VO)** is a network of independent professionals and companies linked by the free flow of information. There is no hierarchy, no central office and no vertical integration : just the skills and resources needed to do the job. By setting up a new virtual organization to address each fresh opportunity, the mix of resources used is always ideal.

Each participating company contributes what it is best at. Because these business are chosen for their leadership in one area only, opportunities will be created for organizations of all sizes, from one-man consultancies upwards. By carefully selecting each partner, it will be possible to create a "best of everything" enterprise. As projects develop, so the virtual organization or corporation will evolve, shedding and gaining partners as appropriate, always maintaining the optimum configuration.

The key is the use of **IT ...**, the breakthrough is virtual network architecture (**VNA**) to be switched between participants for enabling world-wide operations. Information is mandatory as virtual organizations harness people's intellectual powers that is becoming the most valuable asset.

*Excerpts and ideas from
"The Virtual Winners"*

*Professor Roger Nagel, Pennsylvania and
Dave Allen, VNA specialist, UK
in International Management, June 1993 (!) ...*

IST

Information Society Technology

is a large framework for the
European research :
new take up and best practices are now compulsory
for having rapid practical development views.

The term "Innovation" is generally covering that problematic. But talks don't deliver the required practicalities to achieve profitable results as they are too much conceptual.

Technologies transfers are parts of the "concrete reality" and the encounters and seminars we will organize in the coming weeks.

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Associated concepts or tags :

Culture
Language
International collaboration / cooperation
KnowledgeBoard.com
Knowledge Management in Belgium
Etc.

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