

Communication Barriers in Outsourced Business Projects:
American project managers' and staff perceptions of language and cultural
differences between the United States and India

A DOUBLE PLAN B PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

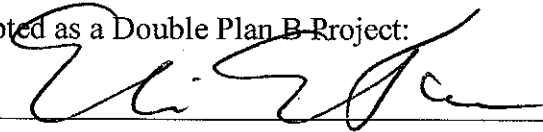
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

February 2006

Accepted as a Double Plan B Project:



Project Supervisor

3/3/06

Date

Abstract

In recent years, many American corporations have sent a large amount of work (e.g., software development, call center operations) to companies overseas, in a move known as “outsourcing.” Previous research has shown that cultural and communication differences between the American companies and their outsourcing providers have caused issues in past projects, issues that have occasionally resulted in the failure of the projects.

Through the use of interviews and surveys, this study investigates the cultural and communication differences between four American corporations and their Indian outsourcing providers, as perceived by the American project managers and staff. The affects of these differences are explored, and recommendations are made for training that could help facilitate communications between the American and Indian staff.

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Communication Barriers in Outsourced Business Projects:

American project managers' and staff perceptions of language and cultural differences between the United States and India

Over the past ten to fifteen years the Information Technology (IT) industry in the United States has undergone a shift from having nearly all of the computer software development done by full-time in-house employees or local consultants, to sending a large amount of the work to companies based overseas (offshore), mainly to India.

The objective of this study is to investigate the communication and cultural issues between the offshore staff in India and the in-house project managers and staff in several corporations here in the United States. The impact that these issues might have on projects, as perceived by project managers and in-house staff, is explored through the use of interviews and surveys.

Introduction

History of Outsourcing

The recent increase in offshore outsourcing was precipitated in part by the Y2K phenomenon. From the beginning of the computer revolution in the mid-20th century, the usual way of encoding a date's year into many computer programs was to store only the last two digits of the number (e.g., 1997 became “97”). In the mid-1990s it became apparent that when the year rolled over from 1999 to 2000, the computers would read 2000 as “00” and would have no way of distinguishing the new year from any other year ending in “00.” To prevent the inevitable computer confusion and possible mayhem – scenarios ranged from a temporary glitch in some systems to world-wide computer failure leading to a loss of electricity, communications, and other critical systems – companies set out to update their computer programs. This created a

huge need for programmers who were not only available but could also understand and update the computer programming languages from previous decades.

At that time there were not enough experienced programmers in the United States to fix all of the affected code in the limited timeframe available. While some employers hired people from outside the industry and provided them with the training they would need to perform the code changes, more cost-conscious businesses began looking overseas to companies with budding technology industries, where there were more qualified professionals than jobs. In the end, “almost 80 percent of the solutions [were] built and deployed from offshore development centers” (Thondavadi & Albert, 2004, p. 41).ⁱ

Initially, a large amount of the outsourced work was sent to Ireland, but the savings were not as great as companies would have liked and the IT industry there was limited by its small size. According to Thondavadi and Albert, “Despite government initiatives, Ireland graduates only 5,000 programmers every year. . . . The short supply of software talent has led to high labor costs. A programmer costs roughly \$25,000 to \$40,000 per year” (p. 88). The costs of hiring a programmer here in the United States at that time were \$40,000 to \$65,000 per year on average.

In contrast, as a growing force in the computer industry India had formed the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), which currently represents over 800 software companies (Davies, 2004, p. 41). There are now 250,000 software industry workers in India and more than 73,000 new workers join the industry every year (Thondavadi & Albert, p. 81). Even ten years ago India clearly had the advantage in sheer volume of programmers. Additionally, with an average annual salary of just over \$6,000, the costs of employing

ⁱ According to a report by Lou Dobbs, more than 800 US corporations currently use offshore outsourcing. See <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/lou.dobbs.tonight/popups/exporting.america/content.html>.

developers in India were considerably lower than employing an equivalent worker in the United States or Ireland (Davies, p. 41). With the added benefit of many Indian workers having been educated in English, India quickly became the preferred choice for outsourcing vendors.

In the years since the resolution of the Y2K dilemma, the type of work sent to India has varied and increased in complexity. In addition to software development, many companies relocate their customer service call centers to India, other companies hire vendors in India to provide medical transcription services, and still other companies have outsourced entire divisions of their operations. With this last type of outsourcing “the vendor assumes the complete operational and strategic responsibility of a function such as HR or finance and accounting. . . . In effect, the [business process outsourcing] vendor takes responsibility for the ownership, administration, execution, and results of that process” (Thondavadi & Albert, p. 51).

Strategies for structuring and managing offshore resources and projects vary from company to company:

- In many companies, a contingent of workers in India supplements the in-house talent and is managed remotely by project managers here. Often, in that case, the American workers have direct communication with the Indian workers as they are, in effect, co-workers and often work closely on the same project.
- In other companies, a project may be staffed entirely by the offshore workers but still managed – remotely – by the American project manager.
- In yet another common arrangement, the offshore workers are a self-contained unit who are managed by an Indian manager on-site in Bangalore or Hyderabad, for example, and that manager is the sole liaison between the Indian workers and the American project manager. With this last arrangement, some companies

request that a few of the Indian workers come onshore for short-term American- and business-culture training – and to learn about the project – before returning to India to manage the offshore project under the direction of the American project manager.

There are many other arrangements, but as with those outlined above nearly all involve communication between the American project manager and/or workers (“in-house” workers) and the offshore resources.

General Issues in International Business

Since much has been written on the challenges of international business ventures, only the most prevalent cultural issues encountered in the research will be reviewed here.

At a basic level is the fact that managerial styles differ across cultures. For example, in dealing with conflict, “U.S. managers make the error of reading silence from their Asian counterpart as an indication of consent.” In contrast, “Asian managers rely on a style of avoiding explicit discussion of the conflict” (Morris, 1998, p. 730). This cultural difference could cause misunderstandings and resentment among business partners, and possibly result in failed business dealings. Regarding methods of managing in India in particular, “Observers have argued that Indian managerial conflict resolution tendencies reflect Hindu norms of seeking a solution that pleases everyone, as well as British norms of active, mutual problem solving” (Morris, p. 735).

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner say that there is even a cultural difference in the view of companies’ Human Resource departments:

It borrows from economics the idea that human beings are ‘resources’ like physical and monetary resources. It tends to assume almost unlimited capacities for individual

development. In countries without these beliefs, this concept is hard to grasp and unpopular once it is understood (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 2).

More than 30,000 managers in 40 countries were asked their views on quality of life. Given the choice between an individualistic “It is obvious that if individuals have as much freedom as possible and the maximum opportunity to develop themselves, the quality of their life will improve as a result” or the more community-oriented “If individuals are continuously taking care of their fellow human beings the quality of life will improve for everyone, even if it obstructs individual freedom and individual development,” 63% of the respondents from India chose the second option. In contrast, just 31% of the respondents from the United States chose the second option (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, p. 51-52).

In addition, unlike in the United States, in many countries age trumps experience in interpersonal relationship hierarchies, even in the business setting. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, upon showing an organizational flow-chart to a worker in Venezuela, were told that there were actually more levels to the hierarchy than were shown. When asked to clarify, he responded, “This person next to me [on the chart] is above me, because he is older” (p. 17). This view of age was also seen in my own experience in South Korea, when witnessing a minor car accident. Neither driver was hurt, but when they got out of their cars to exchange information, the very first question was not, “Are you ok?” or “Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” but “How old are you?” Once the age hierarchy had been established, they could continue with the exchange.

Another possible source of cultural conflict comes from the view of gender. As noted by Rao, gender differences in certain cultures can result in discrimination and communication difficulties between male workers and their female managers (Rao, 2004). In some countries,

companies have found that male employees are uncomfortable reporting to female supervisors, and vice versa. Either a lack of respect for or a feeling of intimidation by the opposite sex can result in tension and conflict in the workplace.

Issues in Outsourcing to India

Cultural and pragmatic issues.

Besides the issues outlined above, there are further cultural and pragmatic issues that can be found in projects that are outsourced to India.

Because of the influence of India’s caste system, “Indian employees are socialized to be dependent and conscious of their lower status relative to management. They tend to prefer a more assertive style of leadership wherein direction and policy flow from authority figures in the organization” (Gopalan & Rivera, 2001, p. 167). This is confirmed by Noble who “found that a fundamental deference to, and respect for, authority figures can cause some personnel from these cultures to not question work assignments in the same way that we have come to expect from U.S. employees” (2005, Cultural Factors section, ¶ 3). Krishna, Sahay, and Walsham’s (2004) findings were similar: Indian offshore staff were unwilling to question or criticize their British managers during face-to-face meetings with them, but they were willing to ask questions and give their opinions via e-mail when not in a meeting. (See also Gopalan & Rivera, 1997.)

Closely connected to deference to authority comes the custom of saying yes to every request, whether or not “yes” means intent to fulfill the request (“Tech Decisions,” 2005). In Davies’ view, “Hierarchies depend on not giving offense. If you can’t give offense up or down the hierarchy, you can’t possibly say no to anything” (p. 130).

Also seen is a difference in the Indian attitude toward time. Gopalan and Rivera (1997) explain the issue, saying that the concepts of karma and rebirth lead to the attitude that anything

not finished in this life can be postponed until the next. This lack of urgency is contrary to the outlook typically found in U.S. companies. Davies devotes an entire chapter of his book to the topic of the Indian view of time. He sums it up by saying, “Time isn’t an absolute in India: it’s a moving target and once it’s gone, it’s always there” (p. 116). This difference can cause difficulties in business relations with American companies who often have the attitude “Time is money!” When American project managers are under tight deadlines, every day counts.

Additional cultural differences that have been reported in projects outsourced to India include the following (list adapted from “Tech Decisions,” 2005, Cultural Differences, Different Behaviors section):

- Avoiding confrontation and conflict.
- Avoiding asking questions, as this is considered rude in India.
- Being uncomfortable “pushing back” on the client. Offshore staff from India are also uneasy about making suggestions for improvement.
- Doing as told. Indian staff will follow orders even if what they are told is wrong and they know it.

Communication issues.

Many offshore outsourcing “communication” issues that are mentioned in the literature reviewed have to do with the technology behind communication (e.g., the transmission delays in videoconferencing), the difficulty in scheduling teleconferencing/ videoconferencing meetings due to time differences (Rao, 2004; “Tech Decisions,” 2005), and the inconvenience of being unable to hold face-to-face meetings (“Offshore outsourcing issues,” n.d.). (See also Noble, 2005.)

The most prominent **language-based** communication issues in outsourcing come from the

language differences between U.S. companies and their outsourcing providers, but one of the purported benefits of outsourcing to India is Indians’ relatively high command of the English language. According to Rao, “one of the most often-cited advantages for outsourcing to India by U.S.-based firms – as opposed to, say, China – has been the availability of a highly educated, English-speaking population” (p. 19). “The Outsourcing History of India” includes a list of the factors in India’s success; the first factor mentioned is “Abundant, skilled, English-speaking manpower” (“The Outsourcing History of India,” n.d., ¶ 5). This is confirmed by Gopalan and Rivera, who write, “large numbers of urban Indians are educated in schools and colleges where English is the language of instruction” (p. 171). According to McKay, there are more than 37,000,000 speakers of English as a second language in India (2002, p. 7).

Despite this strength, however, Rao does point out that “fluency in English is often confused with an understanding of idiomatic expressions” (p. 19). While an American manager may equate closing a successful business deal with “hitting it out of the park,” staff whose culture does not include baseball references would be unlikely to understand the meaning behind that phrase. Thirumalai (2004, section 7, ¶ 3) comments that in Indian English, “Idiomatic expressions are characteristically Indian, with a good sprinkling of idioms from the Victorian age.”

Another issue seen in the literature is Indian English pronunciation. Srivastava (2004, ¶ 12) comments that “Indians have excellent control over written English, yet when it comes to pronunciation, we do not always sound right.” This difference in phonology is explained by Agnihotri, who says that Indians are not motivated to learn British received pronunciation, because that is not the norm in their country. “If a variant of English is not stigmatized in the group to which its speaker belongs, he is not likely to change it whatever be the nature of the

inputs he may receive” (Agnihotri, 1994, as cited in McKay, 2002, p. 70). So although speakers of Indian English may not “sound right” to speakers of American or British English, Indian English is itself one of the many varieties of standard English found around the world.

The issue of pronunciation is brought up again in “Why offshoring hasn’t always been the perfect solution”:

One oft-overlooked aspect of offshore communication is the language barrier. Despite corporate training programs to teach Indian tech support offices to speak English without Indian accents, firms with foreign-based call centers continue to receive complaints of poor English communication skills (n.d., Communication Issues section, ¶ 2).

As mentioned above, some Indian companies have required their employees to go through accent training. Davies relates:

It is true that Indian English speakers are trained to talk in less obviously Indian accents so that they have an acceptable, neutralized pronunciation for Wisconsin or Durham, and there are language trainers who claim to be able to get Indian English speakers to talk in various local accents (p. 45).

Impact and resolution of these issues.

Some companies have seen these culture and communication issues pose a threat to the success of their offshoring ventures. In fact, one study reported that “Nine percent of the time an offshore strategy fails, it is directly due to cultural or communication issues between onshore and offshore teams” (“Offshore Outsourcing: Market Statistics,” 2005, Why Do Offshore Strategies Fail section, ¶ 5). Failure, in this case, generally refers to a company abandoning its offshore endeavors and bringing the work back onshore, if not in-house.

Cultural issues are sometimes addressed through cultural training. Davies mentions,

“cultural matching does occur, particularly where Indians in India are said to keep up to date with events local to the market they are serving” (p. 44). However, according to Krishna, Sahay, and Walsham, although

staff involved in cross-border relationships learn ways to achieve better cross-cultural collaboration[,] . . . cultural training is often perceived as necessary only in one direction, namely for the staff from the software supplier [e.g., India] to learn about the culture of the countries of their client organizations [e.g., the U.S.]. (p. 66.)

In an effort to overcome the language and cultural issues that are found even after the Indian offshore staff have completed accent and cultural training, companies often come to rely on written communication. “Written communication is . . . much less arbitrary and certainly less prone to errors” (“Offshore outsourcing issues,” Lack of Face to Face Communication section, ¶ 2). Companies have found that using writing overcomes some communication problems, “because people generally write more formally than they speak” (“Tech decisions,” 2005, Failure to Communicate section, ¶ 3). Thirumalai comments that “They [the Indian developers] are very good in written expressions, even though such expressions may be rather involved, and may follow the syntactic patterns of olden days” (2004, section 7, ¶ 3). This complexity seems to suggest that speakers of Indian English do not have “poor English communication skills,” as claimed above in “Why offshoring hasn’t always been the perfect solution” (n.d., Communication Issues section, ¶ 2), but that their variety of English is just different than American or British English.

Statement of Problem and Research Questions

In the literature on outsourcing to India, cultural issues have been addressed much more frequently than language/communication issues. Perhaps this is just a reflection of a belief that

since many Indians are educated in a variety of English, language has generally been considered a non-issue. The existing research that does address language issues, however, seems to convey that although many of these offshore workers **are** competent – if not fluent – in English, the English they speak is not necessarily the same as the English used in the North American business world. It would appear, therefore, that the communication difficulties between those in India and in the U.S. come from a problem in understanding each other’s dialect.

By paying less per hour for their offshore development labor, companies certainly seem to be saving money through outsourcing to India. Is it possible, though, that the language and cultural differences between the offshore workers and the American companies’ management and staff may actually have a negative impact on these projects?

The questions that will be addressed in this research are as follows:

- What are the language and cultural differences and issues between India and the United States, as perceived by American project managers and staff in the Midwestern United States?
- How do these issues impact projects that are managed here in the United States and have both American and Indian workers, as perceived by American project managers and staff in the Midwest?

Method

Participants

There were nine participants in this study, all of whom were adult native speakers of American English. Seven of the participants were project managers from four corporations in a Midwestern metropolitan area, whose business focuses ranged from airline to retail. Of these participants, four were male and three female. Five of the seven were born and raised in the

Midwest; one moved frequently as a child and spent time on both coasts; and the other was born and raised in the Eastern United States. These participants had recently managed or were currently managing projects that included both American and Indian staff.

The other two participants were American staff members who reported to one of the interviewed project managers and had recently worked or were currently working with Indian staff. These participants were recruited through their managers and I was given no names or contact information. Because of the manager/employee power balance, I was not allowed to ask the managers to address their employees' participation beyond the initial effort at recruiting, or to ask them to remind their staff or follow up. Therefore, no identifying or background information was collected.

I previously worked for six years as a consultant in the IT industry. Through former managers and co-workers who still work in the industry, I was provided with contact information for project managers who were willing to participate in this study. Each project manager was then contacted directly to arrange an interview. To find study participants for future research, I would suggest that researchers attend one of the Project Management Institute's [<http://www.pmi.org>] monthly regional project manager meetings to ask for volunteers.

Instrument

Interviews

The interview questions were based on my previous experience in the IT industry, which included work with consultants from India. The 30 interview questions were intended to elicit responses about project managers' experiences working with and managing Indian staff. They included questions on the attitudes of American staff to Indian staff, cultural and communication issues the project managers had seen between the two groups, whether additional training would

be beneficial for either group, and whether they thought their company might consider providing such training. The interview questions can be seen in Appendix C.

Surveys

The 17-question survey was adapted from the interview questions and was designed to ask American staff about their experience working with Indian staff. While many of the survey questions were the same as the interview questions, a few of the survey questions were more direct, such as what language and cultural issues the respondent had experienced – rather than what the manager had witnessed – and whether the respondent thought they faced different issues with Indian workers than with American workers. The survey can be seen in Appendix D.

Data Collection

Interviews

The seven project managers each participated in a face-to-face interview with the researcher in late 2005. Four of the project managers were interviewed individually; the other three requested to be interviewed together, as they had all worked on the same project.

Five of the project managers met with me at their offices. The other two project managers asked to meet at a local coffee shop.

At the beginning of each interview, each project manager was given a consent form (see Appendix A) to read and sign, indicating his/her informed consent to participate in this study.

In two of the interviews, the questions were asked in precisely the order listed on the page and the interviewee responded briefly and directly to each question. However, the other interviews did not unfold exactly as expected: after answering the first few questions, the project managers talked at length about their experiences, occasionally asking questions of the researcher, and frequently indirectly answering questions that hadn't yet been asked. The format

of the group interview also deviated from the script seen in Appendix C, because the three interviewees treated the interview more as a conversation amongst themselves, and the researcher did not have to directly ask many of the questions.

The interviews were recorded on an Olympus VN-480PC digital voice recorder (DVR) for transcription purposes, with the interviewees' consent. Since the unit has a powerful built-in microphone no external microphone was used. While recording, the DVR was placed on a table or desk between the researcher and the interviewee(s).

Surveys

At the conclusion of the interviews, the project managers were asked to distribute anonymous survey packets to those in-house staff members who indicated an interest in participating in the study. Each survey packet included a consent document which stated that submission of a completed survey indicated consent to participate in the study, a 17-question survey, and a stamped envelope addressed to the researcher. Six surveys were distributed; two were completed and returned to the researcher in the provided envelopes. Because the surveys were intended to be anonymous and were distributed to the in-house staff through their project managers, no identifying information was collected and there was no way to directly contact the in-house staff to follow up on their responses. The consent document and survey can be seen in Appendices B and D, respectively.

Data Analysis

Interviews

When the interviews were completed, the audio files were transferred to the researcher's home computer, and each interview was transcribed (non-phonetic transcription) in its entirety using Windows Media Player and Microsoft Word. The project managers' answers were then

compiled into a single Excel spreadsheet which listed each of the interview questions. With the questions in the left-hand column, each project manager’s answers were placed in a separate column to the right, labeled “Interview 1,” “Interview 2,” and so on. (See Figure 1.) With the managers’ answers thus side-by-side, the responses could all be compared with relative ease.

Figure 1. Data layout in Microsoft Excel, combining questions and answers from all interviews.

	A	B	C	D
1		Question	Interview 1	Interview 2
2	1	How many people work on your team?	Right now it's a little small. I have 10.	Ten
3	2	How many in-house workers does your team have?	Seven	The team that I get face time with now is four people, that are currently sitting here. There was a current fifth person that I got face time with who was on the initial part of the project. We're now into, uh, we're into rollout and I'm doing support work. So there's four currently that I get to see. The fifth one was actually a specialist, a CRM specialist, that helped to do the layout.
4	3	What is the role of the in-house workers?	They are what we call Business Analysts, so their role is to understand business requirements; and then also, technical architects and their role is at a more central level to design the architecture.	I is a DBA, three others are on the ground support staff here, so if I have problems with something, they're people that I can go through
5	4	How many off-shore workers does your team have?	Three (India)	Behind the scenes there's been half a dozen other people that I've gotten to deal with on the offshore team, typically, um, on the phone. Either direct conversation or um, conference calls. A couple of times we've done the uh TV meetings.
	5	What is the role of the off-shore	They are actually, uh, doing the actual work.	And the half dozen that we had were, um,

The organized data were then reviewed; the most direct or clear responses, and those which provided relevant examples, were highlighted. Following the procedure outlined by Brown and Rodgers (2002, p. 65), the highlighted data were reviewed and coded according to different patterns or themes that were detected (e.g., “language issues” or “negative impact of

cultural issues”), regardless of which interview question the data originally addressed. A second Excel spreadsheet was then created with a separate tab for each theme. Into this new spreadsheet the data were copied and re-categorized by theme, rather than interview question (See Figure 2). The themes were reviewed once more to see if a higher level of classification was possible. The resulting themes are used in the Results section of this paper.

Figure 2. Data layout in Microsoft Excel, themes.

	A	B	C
1	Interview 1 Certainly. One of them is – how can I say this – not understanding, like, I don’t want to say “slang” expressions, but some of our expressions. Because, and this is taken for granted, like ... often we know we have some expressions that they’re not going to understand, but things you don’t even think about, you know, and that’s where we kind of get caught up, because they don’t understand ... idioms	Interview 2 I really don’t know. Um, I’m pretty good – well, I think I’m pretty good – at picking up accents. It’s just, uh, I can mimic accents very easily, so a lot of times I can, I think I can hear things other people don’t hear. In about half the cases, I thought it was not difficult to understand at all. The other half of the cases, huge difficulty.	Interview 3 Well, where I’ve had them repeat something four or five times! And they’re light – very soft-spoken. Umm, and that’s why I was always on them to speak louder, slower - I say, “seriously, speak louder, slower,” and what I would do a lot of times is repeat—“What I heard you say, was...” and so I’d say it back in my own words, just to make sure, because it’s so important that you’re on the same page.
2	a lot of times, you know, they don’t, yeah, just, ok, repeat that, because I know a lot of time when I’m on the phone with them, and I feel bad, like, how many times can you ask them to repeat something? But I really just don’t get it.	Once in a while syntax is a little off, but typically their grammar is amazing and their ability to outline has been exceptional	I use slang all the time. I mean – not swear slang, but just casual slang, that is a part of our being, it’s a part of our, I mean, I couldn’t even talk without using my hands, so I’m sure, and I’ve said –that’s the other thing, when you see the look on their face, I say, “What did I just say that threw them,” you know. Especially when I use analogies.
3			

Surveys

When the surveys were received, the respondents’ answers were added to another Excel

spreadsheet in the same format used for the interview data, with the questions in the left-hand column and the answers from both surveys placed in separate columns to the right. In this way the answers to the two surveys could be easily compared. The same process of coding and categorization, as described above, was applied to the survey data, which was added to the second Excel spreadsheet with the interview data.

Conventions Used

Terminology

“In-house” refers to staff – American or Indian – who were located on-site at the companies’ North American locations. “Offshore” refers to staff who were located in India. In two of the projects, a number of Indian consultants worked both in-house and offshore.

Labeling

In the results tables, project managers are labeled PM-A, PM-B, and so on. Although the fourth interview involved three project managers, they all worked for the same company and are referred to collectively as project manager D, for the sake of simplicity. Survey respondents are labeled SR-A and SR-B in the tables.

Results

Team Size, Composition, and Roles

The first theme in the data addressed team size and composition, and the roles of the team members (both American and Indian).

Team size and composition.

As can be seen in Table 1, the size of the teams ranged from 10 to 46, with the Indian percentages of total staff ranging from 30% for project manager A to 96% for project manager C.

Table 1: Team Size and Composition

Interview	Total number of team-members	American		Indian	
		Number	% of Total	Number	% of Total
PM-A	10	7	70%	3	30%
PM-B	10	4	40%	6	60%
PM-C	46	2	4%	44 ^a	96%
PM-D	10-12 ^b	?	?	10-12 ^c	?
PM-E	27	16	60%	11	40%

^a Eighteen of the Indian team-members were located on-site for the duration of the project. ^b No indication was given as to how many American team-members there were on this project. ^c Four of the Indian team-members were located on-site for the duration of the project.

Team member roles.

The American staff frequently filled the role of business analyst, and were also involved in the support, design, and development of code (see Table 2). The Indian staff were most often responsible for writing the code, but also worked as database administrators, analysts, and project managers (managing other Indian staff).

Table 2: Team Member Roles

Interview	Role of American staff	Role of Indian staff
PM-A	Business analysis (understand business requirements), technical architecture (design the architecture)	Researching, writing code
PM-B	Database administration, ground support staff	Database administration, CRM specialists
PM-C	Assistant project management	Writing code

PM-D	Business analysis, design	Analysis, design, writing code
PM-E	Business analysis, development	Project management, analysis, writing code
SR-A	Management (project lead)	Analysis, design, writing code
SR-B	Management (project lead)	Technical lead, writing code

Team Interactions and Attitudes

The second theme detected in the data addressed the interactions between the American and Indian staff, as well as the attitudes of the American staff toward the Indian staff. A summary of the answers to these questions can be seen in Table 3.

Four of the seven project managers (A, B, C, E) and survey respondent B said there was close interaction between the two groups, while project manager group D and survey respondent A said there was very little contact. For the projects which had some Indian staff located on-site, the primary method of communication was face-to-face, as can be expected. An exception to this arrangement was project manager group D’s project, where one of the Indian staff members located on-site served as a liaison between the American staff and the other Indian staff. On the other projects, where the Indian staff were located offshore, the staff relied on e-mail and phone for their communication.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the attitudes of the American staff in reaction to the use/presence of outsourced Indian staff was largely negative, at least in the beginning. Project managers A, B, D, and E all remarked that there had been some pessimism from their American staff. The reasons ranged from fear of job loss due to heavy use of offshoring, to apprehension because of the anticipated communication issues. According to project manager B:

I think it was, I won't say dramatically negative, but it was negative. I think most people expected that we would have job loss here because offshore was coming in. I also think a lot of them felt like there was a loss of control within the group processes because the offshore was taking place. . . . I think it was just an overall impression from a number of people that going to outsourcing was somehow detrimental. I think some of that diminished as the project went on. I think some of it, too, at some point they just, you know, [had an attitude of] “this is happening anyway, so I may as well accept it.”

When asked about the attitudes of the American staff, project manager A offered her perception of the reason for the concern her staff displayed: “[T]hey were just really concerned about the communication barrier. Really that. And not being able to just walk to their cube and say, ‘Hey, do you understand this?’”

Table 3: Team Attitudes and Interactions

Interview	Do American staff work closely with Indian staff?	What is their primary method of communication?	What is the attitude of American to Indian staff?
PM-A	Yes.	E-mail, documentation exchange, phone	Mixed. Some hesitation, mainly concern about communication issues.
PM-B	Yes.	E-mail mainly, phone	Negative, feeling of loss of control, fear of possible job loss
PM-C	Yes.	Face-to-face with Indian staff located on-site	N/A

PM-D	Minimally ^a	Face-to-face with Indian liaison located on-site	Initial apprehension, fear of job loss
PM-E	Yes, though sometimes with an offshore liaison located on-site	E-mail, phone	Hard to work through, hard for people to understand
SR-A	Minimally	E-mail	N/A
SR-B	Yes	E-mail, phone	N/A

^a While there was minimal contact between the in-house American and offshore Indian staff, there was regular face-to-face contact between the in-house American and the four in-house Indian staff.

Language Training and Skills

The third theme found in the data addressed the previous English language training and language skill levels of the Indian staff (see Table 4).

In response to a question asking what English language training the Indian staff have had, the four project managers (A, B, C, E) who responded said that they did not know.

When asked what language skills caused Indian workers the most difficulty, project managers A, C, D, and E all commented that the Indian staff had difficulty with pronunciation of English. Project managers C, D, and E also mentioned listening skills as a weakness.

Table 4: Indian Staff Language Training/Skills		
Interview	What English language training have the Indian staff had?	What language skills cause the Indian staff the most difficulty?
PM-A	Doesn't know	Pronunciation; understanding idioms
PM-B	Doesn't know	Syntax

PM-C	Doesn't know	Pronunciation; listening comprehension
PM-D	N/A	Pronunciation; listening comprehension
PM-E	Doesn't know	Pronunciation; listening comprehension

Language-based Communication Issues

The next theme in the data was the language-based communication issues the project managers noticed in the interactions between the American and Indian staff.

Each of the project managers and survey respondent B confirmed that their teams had experienced communication issues with the Indian staff. When asked what types of communication issues they had observed, they provided a number of examples, ranging from pronunciation difficulties (e.g., heavy accents) to a low level of listening comprehension.

Pronunciation.

All of the project managers, as well as survey respondent B, commented on the difficulty they had understanding the pronunciation of the Indian staff. Project managers A, C, and D specifically mentioned having to continually ask the Indian workers to repeat themselves. Project manager A said, “[A] lot of times when I’m on the phone with them ... I feel bad, like, how many times can you ask them to repeat something? But I really just don’t get it.”

In an effort to clarify what he thought he’d heard, Project manager C said:

What I would do a lot of times is repeat, “What I heard you say, was...” and so I’d say it back in my own words, just to make sure, because it’s so important that you’re on the same page. . . . And then we follow up with staff reports, make sure that they signed off on that. A lot of extra work, but boy, if you don’t do it, you’re going to get burned.

Project manager D remarked that the difficulty the American managers and staff had in

understanding the Indian staff was frustrating for everyone involved, but that it was inevitable, because “we need to understand that they understand what we’re telling them!”

Listening comprehension.

Five of the project managers (A, C, and project manager group D) and both survey respondents commented that the Indian staff seemed to have difficulties with listening comprehension in their communications with the American staff, including a lack of understanding of American slang and idioms. Project manager D said:

At least in the early days, you didn’t know if they could understand what you were trying to explain or not, because they would not tell you or try to correct you – they would just be in listening mode. Then, when it came down to trying to work with the system, or work with the problem, you could tell they didn’t know what the hell you had talked about. You hadn’t communicated yourself well, you know? So it could be weeks, it could be days, where you’d finally come to that point where they didn’t understand what the heck you were talking about.

Project manager C, who had Indian staff located on-site, remarked that his use of slang and analogies proved to be very difficult for the Indian staff. In order to overcome the misunderstandings, he often relied on paraphrasing and summarizing what he’d said.

Reading/writing.

None of the project managers mentioned reading or writing as an area of great difficulty; in fact, two of the project managers commented that they found the Indian contractors’ reading and writing skills to be very strong. Project manager D said:

Writing was very good, reading was very good. They would write up the document and then we would review it . . . before it would go offshore, to make sure that we were in

agreement with everything. I think they did a very good job of nailing down what we [said]. I mean certainly our internal staff could learn something from just their documentation skills.

On the other hand, project manager A remarked:

Like with anybody technical, their written communication is not such that I'd want to actually pass it on to anybody like in upper management or I'd make a presentation out of it, but I wouldn't want to do that with most people who are technical. I mean, it's just not a strength.

Survey respondent B said that the written communication from the Indian staff was so detailed, that “many times the assumption of basic understanding is [mistakenly] made.” And survey respondent A commented that although there were grammar errors in the Indian staff writing, the errors didn't impede understanding.

Impact of Language-based Communication Issues

The next theme in the data addressed the project managers' and survey respondents' perceptions of the impact of those communication issues described above. While survey respondent A said there had been no negative impact to the projects as a result of the issues, each of the project managers and survey respondent B mentioned a misunderstanding of requirements (i.e., the Indian workers did not understand what was expected of them) being a common problem. As a result, the deliverables that were submitted did not meet expectations and the misunderstandings also led to higher costs and increased project time, in a few cases.

Project managers B and D provided examples from their experience. Project manager B said:

There were three . . . presentations that were done [by the offshore staff]. All three were

just disasters and we thought we learned after the first one that was a disaster. I hadn't set that one up, but we thought when the second one was set up, we said, “Ok, this is what went wrong in the first one.” We set the second one up, and again, it was a disaster. And the third one was set up, and again, a disaster. And it had to do with how fast they were speaking; it had to do with their material being totally geared toward the technical, functional side, rather than toward the user business community, even though after the first two, especially, we said, “You're missing your audience here.” . . . The negative impact has been that those particular modules have not moved one iota. . . . I think, had the presentations been better, we would be further along the line in project planning, rolling things into strategic planning.

Project manager D related the following incident, which ended up costing the company nearly \$200,000:

[W]e had a proposal on the table, we had – of course your fixed bid is a concept of you know, the variable of time and material vs. fixed bid. And they went ahead then, and we had several offshore [companies] fixed-bid this project. Well, [we] went ahead with [Vendor A], because they were the most cost-effective, to the tune of like, a couple hundred thousand less than any of the other bidders. And there was absolute clarification of requirements. They did nothing but agree to those discussions. They got halfway through the project and said, “We're out of money. We can't continue, because we misinterpreted the requirements.”

So they had a discussion, so we came to mitigation on that, we clarified the requirements again, with what they had accomplished. Yet again, they go three-quarters on the project and say again, “We're out of money. We beg for your forgiveness,

[company name]; we didn’t understand the requirements.” . . . [H]ere again, it’s an agreement to what was a fixed-bid requirement, and we ended up almost coming to the next level of a vendor who had bid that big gap.”

Project manager E also mentioned the financial aspect of working with Indian staff. While the savings that companies hope for are seen in time, he said that initially they may not be as great as expected. Although the Indian staff on his project were being paid approximately twenty dollars per hour, the costs over the first year – due to communication difficulties, misunderstandings, and so on – were closer to sixty dollars per hour. “Once you get the team going, get through a year’s worth of time with them, the communication is pretty strong, the understanding is pretty strong, and then you start getting the economics you were looking for.”

Language and Communication Training

The next theme in the data addressed the following categories of language and communication training:

- Additional English language training for the Indian staff
- Additional business English training for the Indian staff
- Communication training for the American staff

In addition, the project managers reflected on whether their companies might consider offering such training and whether it would be cost-effective to do so.

English language training for Indian staff.

All of the project managers and survey respondent A said that – under the right circumstances – further English language training would be valuable for the Indian staff. Project manager A commented that she thought English language training might be beneficial, in order to differentiate between the British English they learn in India and the American English they

must understand and use when working with American companies. When asked whether it would be cost-effective for her company to offer language training for the Indian staff, she said it could be if that training were incorporated into the cultural training course her company already offers to the in-house Indian staff. She did not think, though, that a separate language course would be worth the expense.

Project manager B, when asked whether her company might consider this training to be beneficial, replied:

Do they need it or do they **know** they need it? That is the question. I think our company is coming to a realization that we really don't have a standard language across the company. That we are not all using the same standards and information. . . . I think that would be good on any side of the fence, but as we move into global operations we need to be able to get standard language out there.

Survey respondent B commented that the Indian firm that employs their Indian staff “provides three months of American culture and English courses to prepare them to work with American-based companies.” However, no further details were provided on what these courses covered.

Business English training for Indian staff.

The feelings on business English training were generally less positive. Three of the project managers (A, C, E) didn't see much benefit in it (project manager group D did not comment on this topic). When asked if she thought business English training would be beneficial, project manager A remarked:

I would say, “No,” only because mainly who talks and works with our offshore are other developers, who aren't speaking so much “business-ese.” They're not talking about [unintelligible] or shareholders, they're talking about, like, code stuff. They're already

talking their own kind of language anyway. It’s not like it’s business-speak, it’s more already about the technology and what they’re trying to do.

Only project manager B thought it might be beneficial. She said that consistency in terminology was crucial in a company, because having different definitions for terms can lead to misunderstandings.

Communication training for American staff.

Of the three project managers (A, B, E) and one survey respondent (A) who commented on the potential benefits of communication training for their American staff, all thought such training might be helpful, although the extent of project manager E’s response was, “Could be helpful.” Project managers A and B provided more thorough answers, along with the rationale for their views.

Project manager A said that teaching the American staff to speak more slowly and to use fewer idioms would be very helpful. As for whether it would be worth the effort and expense, she said:

I think [training should be] more of a sit-down, and I say that because to me there the investment is very much worth it because more and more American companies are going with offshore IT workers, so this is something they’re going to encounter again and again. They either probably haven’t done it before, they’re not comfortable with it, but you know what? Get used to it, that’s where we’re going.

So I think investing now to help them get over that, I think would be worth it. It’s a long-term investment in our employees because this project, the next project, the following project, they’re probably going to involve some kind of offshore.

When asked if this type of training is something she thought her company might offer, project

manager B said her company would consider it if it was apparent that miscommunication was costing the company money. In her understanding, project management failures can often be the result of communication failures and she believes that improving “communications toward project management skills” would be seen as very beneficial.

Cultural and Pragmatic Issues

The next theme identified in the data, which was mentioned by project managers A, D, and E, dealt with the cultural issues that arose between the American and Indian staff. The most frequently mentioned issues were all pragmatic differences: a) the Indian staff tendency to not ask for clarification, b) their reluctance to disagree with or question the American staff or management, and c) their seeming inability to say “No.”

On the first point, project manager A said that the Indian staff would not ask her to repeat a sentence if they misunderstood; instead, they would always say “Ok, yep, ok” to any request, whether or not they understood what had been asked.

Concerning the reluctance to disagree with or question the managers, project manager A commented that the Indian staff were always very deferential to her and would agree to any request or directive. In contrast, because she did not have any experience as a developer, the American development staff wouldn’t hesitate to let her know if her requests were not reasonable.

Regarding a unwillingness to say “no,” project manager D said, “. . . they never said ‘No,’ you know, when you would present them with an idea or a problem or a task. And I mean, we could’ve been asking them to go to the moon, and they would’ve said ‘Yes!’”

Project manager B, however, brought up a fourth issue. She said:

[F]or myself specifically, and other people in general, there at times has been [the

perception] that we’re being talked down to. . . . One of the first people that I got to deal with over there was an Indian gentleman who really did think that the sun rose and set [because of him]. If he had been a rooster, he would have said, “Because I crow, the sun shines.” I think with some people I have perceived an attitude of male superiority, male chauvinism. . . . And I’ve actually mentioned this to our account [the Indian vendor]. . . . One [problem] I didn’t think went away, so I mentioned to him, “You have to understand how you come across when you’re saying some of these things to people here.”

This issue of gender conflict was echoed by survey respondent B, who said, “In the beginning (about 7 years back) there was more resistance to getting direction from females, whereas I do not see the problem now.”

Impact of Cultural and Pragmatic Issues

The next theme in the data addressed the project managers’ perceptions of the impact of the cultural and pragmatic issues described above. Just four of the managers addressed this topic (B, project manager group D), and they reported different results. Project manager D gave the following example:

[Y]ou’d have these tasks that would go on and on forever and ever and ever, because yeah, we can all do anything, it’s just at what cost? I just think they never said “No!” . . .

So, I usually get frustrated with them sometimes about that.

Project manager B, in reference to the perception of male superiority, commented that two female American business analysts who had been working directly with the Indian staff had recently left the project. While there were additional reasons for their departure, she had heard that one of the reasons was that both of them felt that they had been “talked down to” by the male Indian staff.

Cultural Training

Following the discussion of cultural issues, the managers addressed the perceived benefits of cultural training for the Indian and American staff.

Cultural training for Indian staff.

Six of the project managers (A, C, project manager group D, E) talked about cultural training for the Indian staff, each of them commenting that such training would be beneficial.

Project manager A said:

I think the only thing cultural is helping them be more aware of their ability to really ask, “Why? How?” I mean, really that they can just be comfortable. . . . Now, every manager is a little bit different, but most managers would be fine with you saying, “I don’t understand” or “What?” or “I disagree” or whatever. So making them more comfortable with that. And that, I think, would be very cost-effective, yes, because that’s, to me that’s more important than any kind of language barrier.

Cultural training for American staff.

The idea of training the American staff on cultural differences was welcomed by six of the managers (B, C, project manager group D, E). Project manager B said that teaching the American staff how to interact with the Indian staff and how to deal with the differences would be helpful.

Project manager D said, “We as a company used to pay for our expatriates going off-shore; [one team member], for example, went for a week seminar on cultural and interpersonal communications for Japanese interaction, years ago. Because that made money.”

Survey respondent A, however, did not see a need for cultural training, saying, “[O]ur staff appears sensitive to cultural differences/diversity.”

Working Around the Issues

Another theme that was found in the data addressed how the project managers and their teams worked around the communication and cultural issues, how they dealt with the difficulties on a daily basis. There were two main strategies: having the Indian staff paraphrase back to the managers what they had just been instructed, and foregoing verbal communication in favor of written communication.

The use of paraphrasing to help communication was mentioned by several of the project managers. Project manager A described her experience in this way:

One of the things is to obviously check for comprehension, but instead of just saying, “Do you understand?”, instead of asking a Yes/No question, make it like an interview question, where you have to actually answer something back. So it’s like, “Well, so what am I saying here?” or “What does this mean?” You know, making them kind of repeat something back as well as asking for [clarification].

Project manager C also found that approach to work well:

There’s been a number of cases where I’d be telling them what we need to do, and I’d say, “Just so we’re on the same page, could you repeat back to me, you know, what I just said – the meaning?” And so I only had to do that a couple of times, and it wasn’t long after that that they’d raise their hands and say, “I don’t understand what you meant by that.” So when they knew that possibility that they’d be picked to repeat back – be called on the carpet – then they wanted to make sure they really knew what it was.

In addition to paraphrasing, four of the managers (project manager group D, E) and survey respondent B used written communication to navigate the issues. Project manager D explained that the preference for written communication stemmed from the absence of accents and slang in

writing. When those factors were not present, the communication with the Indian staff improved. He said,

They did a very good job in documenting, they really did. We were able to edit it extremely well, and we communicated a lot that way, and I think got over a lot of hurdles. But it took a long time to figure that out; you're trying to explain everything, and we certainly lost a lot.

When preparing to introduce two new American project coordinators to the group, project manager C recognized the issues they were likely to face and took the time to explain these issues. He told them, “We've got top-notch people here, but you need to understand that there's huge cultural differences, and why some of the challenges we're going to have, we're working through, is communicating and making sure that you're understood.” He went on to explain the cultural and communication differences the new project coordinators would encounter.

Relationship of Results to Research Questions

Regarding the first research question (language and cultural issues between the U.S. and India), the main language-based communication issues found in this study are English pronunciation, a difference between American and Indian English idioms and slang, and the difficulties in listening comprehension between the two groups. The most prevalent cultural differences are actually differences in pragmatic behavior, such as a reluctance to ask for clarification, say “no,” or question those in a position of authority.

In answer to the second research question (how do these issues impact the outsourced projects), this study found that there can be a great impact to the project timelines and to the project budget. The financial setbacks come not only in the obvious examples, such as in the fixed-bid project fiasco that cost project manager D's company nearly \$200,000 more than

anticipated, but also in the almost ubiquitous misunderstood requirements. Whenever the requirements are misunderstood and the Indian staff deliver a product that does not meet specifications, each hour that went into that product’s development was paid for by the American company and each hour that will go into developing the corrected product (including additional requirements meetings and additional development time/wage for the Indian staff) creates more of a financial burden for the American client.

It also seems that the communication issues have a much greater negative impact on the outsourced projects than the cultural issues do. This is contrary to what was implied in most of the literature. Davies’ book, for example, devoted several chapters to navigating the cultural differences between India on the one hand and the U.S. and U.K. on the other. However, his attention to the language differences encompassed less than two pages. A similar lack of focus on language was found in many of the other studies. What could explain this imbalance? Is there such a common perception that companies will experience few-to-no language differences between Indian English and American English? Or is it assumed that the cultural differences will have a vastly greater impact? Or were the companies that participated in this study an anomaly?

Discussion

Patterns in the Observations

This study found that language difficulties were prevalent in the data, with most participants considering the English pronunciation and listening abilities of the Indian staff to be inadequate for clear communication. These difficulties were seen by the project managers to be the cause of misunderstood requirements, which was a problem found in the responses of each project manager and one of the survey respondents. Misunderstood requirements manifested themselves through the Indian workers submitting a product (often a portion of computer code or

a completed software program) that did not meet the specifications agreed upon at the start of the project. These setbacks had financial ramifications for the project managers and had the added impact of an increase in project time.

Cultural issues were also seen in the data and were often described as a tendency on the part of the Indian staff to agree to everything, as well as a reluctance to say “no,” question the project managers, or ask for clarification. While the participants didn’t ascribe to these issues as great a negative impact as the communication issues, there were some long-lasting impacts, such as projects that exceed their timelines and team members leaving, in part because of cultural/relational differences with the Indian staff.

In response to these language and cultural barriers, several of the project managers had taken steps to overcome the issues. The practice of paraphrasing when speaking to the Indian staff, or requiring the Indian staff to paraphrase what was just said to them, are methods that seem to be common across the companies. In addition, a reliance on written communication (e-mail or document exchange), which tends to be more formal, was found to help avoid many of the typical communication issues (e.g., accent, speed of speech, use of idioms and slang).

Although they were often aware of language and cultural training being provided to the Indian staff and thought additional training might be beneficial, the idea of providing training (whether cultural or communication) to the American staff seemed to be a new idea for the majority of the study participants. This might suggest that many of the American project managers and staff regard bridging the communication gap to be the responsibility of the Indian workers. In other words, if the issues are to be overcome, they think it will only be through the extended efforts of the Indian staff. If this is the case, then this view of communication modification as a one-sided problem needs to change before the issues in this study will be

resolved. The efforts of both language groups are needed. Such efforts on the part of the American companies might include providing communication training for the American staff; hiring managers who have had some exposure (whether in their personal life or through work) to other cultures and languages; and inviting ESL teachers into the work-place to present a perspective on working with people from other cultural and language backgrounds.

Exceptions to the Patterns

In contrast to the other language-based communication issues, the writing skills of the Indian staff were often viewed as above-average, or at least non-problematic. A few of the companies came to rely on written communication in their interactions with the Indian staff.

Differences were also found in the experiences of the various project managers and survey respondents, as well as in the issues they'd encountered and the impact of those issues.

Comparison with Literature

In many ways, the data collected in this study agree with the studies cited at the beginning of this paper. The types of issues found in the realms of language and cultural interactions were mostly the same; however, the extent to which these issues impacted the projects studied was much greater than would be expected based on the existing literature.

Communication issues.

Srivastava's (2004) acknowledgment of the pronunciation differences between Indian and American English was confirmed by the project managers' and survey respondents' experiences. While some Indian companies provide training with the goal of helping their employees learn how to speak English with a more American accent, it seems that either this is not a widespread practice or the training has failed in achieving its objective. Since each of the participants in this study mentioned the heavy Indian accents as an impediment to clear communication, perhaps

this is a bigger issue than previously thought. Agnihotri’s statement (1994, as cited in McKay, 2002, p. 70) implied that speakers of Indian English will not be motivated to learn a more American accent because the way they speak is the norm in India. If this is true, then is it realistic to expect that the Indian workers will change their speech to adapt to the listening abilities of the American project managers and staff?

The difficulty that the Indian staff had in understanding American idioms echoes what was found by Rao (2004) and Thirumalai (2004). Most of the participants who mentioned this seemed to suggest that it was more of an annoyance than an issue. The only ramification was that the project managers and American staff had to be mindful of how they communicated, remembering not to use idioms and slang. While the literature mentioned that Indian English has “a good sprinkling of idioms from the Victorian age” (Thirumalai, section 7, ¶ 3), none of the participants in this study mentioned Indian English idioms. All comments about idioms were limited to the Indian workers’ comprehension of American English idioms.

Surprisingly, while the Indian workers’ low level of listening comprehension wasn’t mentioned in the literature, it was mentioned by nearly all of the study participants. It would seem that the Indian workers’ difficulty in understanding their American counterparts mirrors the difficulty the American project managers and staff have in understanding the workers from India. The differences in English pronunciation found between the two groups cause comprehension problems in both directions. The consequences of the Indian staff not understanding what they hear are considerable: misunderstood requirements cause numerous problems for companies, including the wrong product, extended deadlines, and (as a result) strapped budgets. For the project managers and American staff, not being able to understand the speech of the Indian workers leads them to frequently ask the Indian workers to repeat themselves. From the

perspective of a second language learner, the knowledge that native speakers cannot understand one’s speech can be very intimidating, and in the case of the Indian workers this might contribute to their reluctance to ask questions or ask for clarification.

Cultural issues.

Although three of the seven project managers interviewed were female, only project manager B mentioned gender discrimination or an attitude of male superiority from the Indian staff. (The gender of the survey respondent who echoed this sentiment was not reported.) This perception of male superiority was believed to be at least partially responsible for the departures of two female American business analysts from the project. While the literature stated that gender differences can be a possible cultural issue in international business dealings, the only effect mentioned was that it could “present obstacles to communication with senior managers of the opposite sex” (Rao, 2004, p. 19). This effect was confirmed by survey respondent B’s comment that the Indian staff seemed, at first, to have difficulty taking direction from female team leads. In contrast, though, project manager A – who is also female – did not mention any gender-related issues. She found that the Indian staff were very deferential to her. This could indicate that the issue experienced by project manager B’s business analysts was not something to be blamed on the Indian background of the offending worker, but rather a culture-independent personality conflict.

The cultural trait of deference to authority figures, as seen in Noble (2005), was found in project manager A’s experience of the Indian staff never asking for clarification or questioning her directives. Although in the literature this issue was separated from the problem of the Indian staff always agreeing or saying “yes” to every request, I wonder if the two are related. Perhaps the cultural need to defer to the manager results in the need to acquiesce to every request, no

matter how unreasonable or difficult to fulfill. After all, saying “no, I can’t do what you requested” may imply that the manager is being unreasonable in making the request or may be thought to reflect poorly on the manager’s intelligence. It is also possible that “yes” in many cases just means “I have heard your request.” However, as this study only looks at the issues from the perspective of the American project managers and staff, the actual meaning behind the Indian workers’ replies of “yes” cannot be stated for certain.

The relaxed attitude toward time mentioned in the literature (Davies, 2004; Gopalan & Rivera, 1997) was not mentioned by any of the study participants. Although prolonged project timelines have previously been interpreted as being a result of the Indian attitude toward time, I wonder if this is not the case. Based on the experiences of the study participants, I would like to suggest that some of those missed deadlines might actually be the result of language difficulties, not a cultural difference. If this is true, then rather than accepting this issue as a by-product of a cultural difference, hopefully the additional weight that this adds to the need for clear communication might help companies (American and Indian) see the benefits of additional language training.

No mention of age relations was found in the study data.

Since some of the Indian firms do put their employees through cultural training, it could be that the two issues (attitude toward time and age relations) which were found in the literature but not in the data, have been presented in a training course, with the result that the Indian staff have become aware of and are now able to avoid conflicts on these issues. Another possibility is that previous researchers, in their focus on cultural differences between the two groups, have misidentified some of the issues, blaming the results of communication difficulties on cultural differences, as proposed above. In order to determine what is really happening, further research

could investigate a larger number of projects, controlling variables such as age, including the Indian staff in the study, and determining what the Indian workers’ language skill levels are. Doing so would allow better insight into the interactions between the two groups and might provide answers to what type of training would be most effective.

Implications

The results found in the data seem to indicate a need for further cultural and communication training for both the Indian and American staff, perhaps including a new approach to interactions between the two groups.

Training for the American staff.

The methods project manager C used to improve communications – such as paraphrasing what he had said, calling on the Indian staff to paraphrase what they had heard, and preparing the American staff for the cultural and language differences they were likely to face – were largely successful and could perhaps be used by other project managers.

The American staff could also be trained to use certain techniques in their interactions with Indian staff, including avoiding idioms, speaking more clearly and slowly, and using fewer colloquialisms (all modifications of speech known as Foreigner Talk). Interestingly, Bondevik’s (1996) study suggested that many native speakers are unwilling to modify or simplify their speech when in conversation with a non-native speaker, because they feel that to do so would be perceived as insulting to the non-native speaker. In particular, his study found that native speakers who were from the Midwest were less willing to engage in Foreigner Talk than those who were from the U.S. coastal areas, perhaps partly because of a relative lack of experience interacting with non-native speakers. Teaching the American staff how to modify their language when speaking with the Indian staff could help ease many of the communication difficulties.

In addition, the attitudes of the American staff toward the Indian staff, which were found to be largely negative, could play a large role in the success or failure of their communications. In her study on whether attitudes toward a non-native speaker's country of origin, educational status, and language ability (relative to a native speaker) affect a native speaker's perception of that non-native speaker, Brown (1988) reported that listeners' perceptions of a speaker's background influence their evaluation of the speaker's linguistic competence (including grammaticality, accent, and understandability). She found that “[C]ountry of origin, an index of perceived ethnicity, affects a listener's evaluation of and attitudes toward a speaker's perceived language competence” (p. 113). Because many American workers have a negative view of outsourcing, that attitude could affect their ability to understand the Indian staff and might influence the effort the Americans put forth in cooperating with their Indian team mates. Helping them understand that outsourcing is now a fact of life in many companies and the presence of Indian staff does not necessarily portend the loss of their jobs, may make them more willing to put forth an effort toward understanding the Indian workers.

Finally, accent familiarization training could be helpful for the American staff, too. If they learned about the sounds of Indian English, they might have an easier time understanding the Indian staff.

Training for the Indian staff.

For the Indian staff, clear pronunciation is very important when they will be working or interacting regularly with native speakers. Accents are difficult to modify completely and can cause communication issues even for those whose command of a language is otherwise very good. In order to minimize the potential problems with accents, companies (American or Indian) could look into providing English pronunciation courses for the Indian staff.

The Indian staff might also benefit from becoming more familiar with the American idioms and slang they are most likely to encounter in the workplace. Further training in techniques such as asking for clarification and paraphrasing what they've heard could also help reduce the many instances of misunderstood requirements.

Limitations

A considerable limitation in this study is that the opinions of the Indian staff were not obtained. While this study's initial aim was to research the communication and cultural issues between in the American and Indian staff from the perspective of the American companies, implications as to the meaning and function of these issues cannot be conclusively made without knowing how these interactions were viewed by the other parties involved. Future research involving interviews or surveys of the Indian staff located in the United States would provide valuable insight into these issues. Samples of actual communication between the two groups would be beneficial and could consist of business e-mails that the participants are willing to share or an audio recording of a team meeting. Perhaps another researcher could even obtain funding to travel to India in order to observe and collect data from Indian workers located offshore and learn more about the communication and cultural training that is already being offered to Indian workers.

While this study attempted to gain insight into the interactions of American project managers and staff with Indian staff, the sample size was regrettably small. With only seven project managers from four companies and two survey respondents, it is difficult to make any broad statements based on the data.

Being unable to control for such a diversity in the construction of the teams was another problem. The model that the interview and survey questions were designed around had American

staff located on-site and Indian staff located offshore, but in reality several of the projects in this study had Indian staff located on-site and one had no American staff. It is also possible that the communication abilities and attitudes of Indian staff could be different for those who are located in-house and those located offshore, and this study does not address that difference. For future research, perhaps the participants could be categorized depending on team construction (e.g., American staff located on-site and Indian staff located offshore; American staff located on-site and Indian staff located both on-site and offshore; etc). This might allow the researcher to see patterns in the responses that could be attributed to the structure and experiences of the team.

In addition, very few surveys were returned; as the survey respondents' names were not collected, following up on the distributed surveys was not an option. Recruiting the survey respondents directly, rather than through their managers, would remove this issue and allow the researcher to follow up if necessary.

Another limitation was with the interview questions. These questions focused mostly on the issues and very little on the possible resolution of the issues. Several of the project managers did volunteer information about their attempts to resolve the communication and cultural issues, but for future research, it might be beneficial to ask the project managers directly about their methods of working around these issues. Additionally, in some cases examples or explanations of the issues were not pursued, such as with project manager B's mention of gender bias. While this issue was brought up and project manager B stated that some of the American staff felt “talked down to,” she did not elaborate or provide a concrete example.

Further limitations include the fact that so little background information was gathered on the respondents. For example, we do not know the regional background of the survey respondents. This may be relevant, as there are differences between U.S. coastal English and

mid-western English. Also, we do not know what previous cross-cultural experiences most of participants had had, whether they had studied a foreign language in the past, whether they had done any international traveling, and so on. All of these factors could influence their perceptions of the issues.

Conclusions

This study found that the participating American project managers do experience language and culture-related issues with the Indian staff, and gave insight into what those issues are. The results also showed what a negative impact the communication issues can have, such as prolonged project timelines, code that does not meet specifications, and increased costs. In addition, the data revealed the methods some project managers use in order to bypass these issues, methods such as paraphrasing oral communication or relying on written communication.

Hopefully companies are aware of the hurdles that they might face when sending work offshore, including the likelihood that costs will initially be higher than expected. Knowing in advance what the best practices are for relations with Indian staff might help corporations deal with communication and cultural problems, and their ramifications, before they occur.

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Appendix A – Interview Consent Form

Communication Barriers in International Business Projects

You are invited to participate in a research study of communication issues between in-house and off-shore workers in the IT industry. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a project manager overseeing both in-house and off-shore workers. This study is being conducted by Angela J. Landt, a graduate student in the program in English as a Second Language at the University of Minnesota. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to research the communication issues between in-house and off-shore workers, specifically off-shore workers from the Indian sub-continent. It is our understanding that many of these off-shore workers are fluent in English - for some, it is their first language; however, the English they speak is not necessarily the same as the English used in the North American business world. We would like to investigate whether these language issues have had any impact on project planning, implementation, timelines, and results.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to participate in a one-hour, face-to-face interview regarding your team's in-house and off-shore workers, and any communication/language issues they have experienced. As a project manager, you will also be asked to refer team members who might be willing to complete one paper survey consisting of no more than 20 questions. We would also ask that you be willing to answer any follow-up questions. Please note that an audio recording will be made of all face-to-face interviews.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study involves the risk that you may become uncomfortable or find some of the questions to be sensitive, but you may skip any questions. There are no direct benefits associated with participating in this study.

Compensation:

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records and audio recordings of the interviews will be stored securely and only the researcher and her university supervisor will have access to the records. When the study has been completed, the records and recordings will be destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Angela J. Landt. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at:

Angela J. Landt
ILES
214 Nolte Center
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 624-3331 or e-mail landt010@umn.edu

You may also contact this researcher’s academic advisor:

Elaine Tarone, Professor
English as a Second Language
331G Nolte Center
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 624-2023 or e-mail etarone@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B – Survey Consent Document

Communication Barriers in International Business Projects

You are invited to participate in a research study of communication issues between in-house and off-shore workers in the IT industry. You were selected as a possible participant because you work on a project that has both in-house and off-shore workers. This study is being conducted by Angela J. Landt, a graduate student in the program in English as a Second Language at the University of Minnesota. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to research the communication issues between in-house and off-shore workers, specifically off-shore workers from the Indian sub-continent. It is our understanding that many of these off-shore workers are fluent in English - for some, it is their first language; however, the English they speak is not necessarily the same as the English used in the North American business world. We would like to investigate whether these language issues have had any impact on project planning, implementation, timelines, and results.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to complete a written survey, consisting of no more than 20 questions, regarding any communication/language issues you have experienced in your interactions with the off-shore workers. The survey should take 20-60 minutes to complete. You will also be given a stamped, addressed envelope in which to return the completed surveys directly to Angela Landt.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study involves the risk that you may become uncomfortable or find some of the questions to be sensitive, but you may skip any questions. There are no direct benefits associated with participating in this study.

Compensation:

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records and audio recordings of the interviews will be stored securely and only the researcher and her university supervisor will have access to the records. When the study has been completed, the records and recordings will be destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Angela J. Landt. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at:

Angela J. Landt
ILES
214 Nolte Center
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 624-3331 or e-mail landt010@umn.edu

You may also contact this researcher’s academic advisor:

Elaine Tarone, Professor
English as a Second Language
331G Nolte Center
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 624-2023 or e-mail etarone@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

Returning a completed survey implies consent to participate in this study.

Appendix C – Interview Questions

1. How many people work on your team?
2. How many in-house workers does your team have?
3. What is the role of the in-house workers?
4. How many off-shore workers does your team have?
5. What is the role of the off-shore workers?
6. What types of projects does your team work on?
7. Do the in-house and off-shore workers work together closely on projects?
8. What is the primary method of communication used between the in-house and off-shore workers?
 - E-mail
 - Telephone
 - Video conferencing
 - Other
9. What is the general attitude of your in-house workers toward working with the off-shore workers? If there is any negativity, what do you think might be the cause or target?
10. What English language training have the off-shore workers had?
11. Has your team experienced any communication issues with the off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?
12. Have any conflicts arisen on your team because of miscommunication between the in-house and off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?
13. Have any conflicts arisen on your team because of cultural differences between the in-house and off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?

14. If the off-shore workers have any communication difficulties, what skill would you say they have the most difficulties with?

- Listening. Examples: _____
- Speaking. Examples: _____
- Reading. Examples: _____
- Writing. Examples: _____

15. What specific types of communication issues do you see between your in-house and off-shore workers?

- Accent. Examples: _____
- Slang. Examples: _____
- Vocabulary. Examples: _____
- Business-specific language. Examples: _____
- Cultural issues. Examples: _____

16. Have these communication issues had any negative impact on project planning, implementation, timelines, or results? If so, could you provide specific examples?

17. Do you think English language training for the off-shore workers would be beneficial?

- If so, how?
- Do you think such training would be cost-effective (i.e., the benefits received would outweigh any cost incurred)?

18. Do you think your company would be willing to consider providing English language training to the off-shore workers? If so, what factors do you think would influence the decision whether or not to implement such training? Cost? Time? Logistics?

19. Do you think business-specific English language training for the off-shore workers would be beneficial? If so, how? Do you think such training would be cost-effective?
20. Do you think your company would be willing to consider providing business-specific English language training to the off-shore workers? If so, what factors do you think would influence the decision whether or not to implement such training? Cost? Time? Logistics?
21. Do you think cultural training for the off-shore workers would be beneficial? If so, how? Do you think such training would be cost-effective?
22. Do you think your company would be willing to consider providing cultural training to the off-shore workers? If so, what factors do you think would influence the decision whether or not to implement such training? Cost? Time? Logistics?
23. Do you think communication training for the in-house workers would be beneficial? If so, how? Do you think such training would be cost-effective?
24. Do you think your company would be willing to consider providing communication training to the in-house workers? If so, what factors do you think would influence the decision whether or not to implement such training? Cost? Time? Logistics?
25. Do you think cultural training for the in-house workers would be beneficial? If so, how? Do you think such training would be cost-effective?
26. Do you think your company would be willing to consider providing cultural training to the in-house workers? If so, what factors do you think would influence the decision whether or not to implement such training? Cost? Time? Logistics?
27. Have you, as the project manager, experienced any language-based communication issues with the off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?

28. Have you experienced any culture-based communication issues with the off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?
29. Do you think you face different communication issues with the off-shore workers than you do with the in-house workers?
30. Are there any other comments or issues you would like to address that we have not talked about?
31. Would you be willing to be contacted once more to answer follow-up questions, should there be any?

Appendix D – Survey Questions

1. How long have you worked on this project?
2. What is your role in this project?
3. Had you worked with off-shore workers before you joined this project?
4. How closely do you work with the off-shore workers on your current project(s)?
5. What is the role of the off-shore workers on this project?
6. What is the primary method of communication used between you and the off-shore workers?
 - E-mail
 - Telephone
 - Video conferencing
 - Other _____
7. Have you experienced any language-based communication issues with the off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?
8. Have you experienced any culture-based communication issues with the off-shore workers? If so, could you provide examples?
9. Have you experienced any conflicts with the off-shore workers because of language-based miscommunication? If so, could you provide examples?
10. Do you think you face different communication issues with the off-shore workers than you do with other in-house workers? Please explain.
11. In what language skill area would you say the off-shore workers have the most problems?
 - Listening. Examples:
 - Speaking. Examples:

Reading. Examples:

Writing. Examples:

12. What specific types of communication issues do you see when working with the off-shore workers?

Accent. Examples:

Use/understanding of slang. Examples:

Vocabulary. Examples:

Business-specific language. Examples:

Cultural differences. Examples:

13. In your view, have these communication issues had any negative impact on project planning, implementation, timelines, or results? If so, how?

14. Do you think English language training for the off-shore workers could be beneficial? If so, how?

15. Do you think communication training for the in-house workers could be beneficial? If so, how?

16. Do you think cultural training for the in-house workers could be beneficial? If so, how?

17. In the space provided below, please write any additional information that you think would be beneficial for me to know. Thank you.