

Cultural diversity and software exports

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For Indian professionals, the software export business has literally and figuratively exposed them to the world. Never before in the history of the country have so many young men and women left Indian shores to work abroad on assignments at different customer sites throughout the world mainly the USA, the UK, parts of Northern and Central Europe and the Far East. This has given our professionals tremendous exposure to varying lifestyles and cultures and brought home the inadequacy of training to cope with management of cultural diversity. The challenges that differing cultural climes pose are enormous and can be a strain if not handled well and taken in the spirit of business learning and maturing.

Today, Indian software companies mainly export software services to the US, the UK, Japan, Singapore and to some extent Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and other parts of western and central Europe. The situations are diverse ... traveling first time by air, first time abroad and first time working for another organisation which may have a totally different organizational mindset and culture.

I remember my first assignment as a software developer in the small almost unknown city of Graz (it is the second largest city of Austria after Vienna, with a population of 2.37 lakhs) and landing there just before midnight and to a cold welcome of -5 degrees celsius. As a Bombayite I had never witnessed temperatures below 15 degrees. Never seen snow in my life. Did not speak German that could be understood by the locals. For the first time faced immigration and police checks in a foreign country. Bags being ripped open and thoroughly searched for drugs, etc. And to live in a place where people did not simply comprehend how vegetarians like me could think of surviving for over a year! Hardly anyone spoke English except for a few discernible words with pronunciation that was difficult to discern. And in the

IT department only one Austrian spoke English who resigned after a few months

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of our arrival.

But this adversity brought strength of purpose. We learnt German, and in a year's time we were making our software review presentations in broken, albeit comprehensible, German. But this experience helped sow the seed. To think beyond the usual. To look at the challenges that lay ahead while working with diverse cultures and managing that diversity to advantage. This helped understand the necessity of training before we departed from India, training in foreign languages, briefing on cultural issues, preparation for intercultural conflicts, handling of misunderstandings due to spoken and body language, appreciating and respecting local habits and value systems, ethics and morals. But this was more than 10 years ago, when the software industry was not so ripe and mature in terms of volume of business or number of companies in the export circle.

Today, several of the initial hurdles have been overcome through the guinea pigs of yesteryears. Many Indian companies have started training their professionals in different languages be they German, French or Japanese. Software companies print their brochures in many of these languages. But unfortunately, to this day, there is very inadequate training in managing cultural diversity and using it to enrich the partnership process between supplier and customer, both belonging to different continents. This is more pronounced while doing business with Europe and Japan than the USA.

I recall delivering a sales presentation to a major international firm from whom

were seeking software contracts. After I had finished and thrown the floor open for questions, I was asked what they should do to handle the strong accents that Indians from India have while speaking English. I indicated that in the UK itself there were strong accents ... Cockney, North, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Liverpool, etc., and in some cases it was even difficult for the Britisher to understand some of the spoken accents. The customer would be expected to accept the diversity in Indian accents in the same way as he did with their country-wide accents. I emphasized that it was but impossible for a person's spoken English not to be affected by his mother tongue and this had to be respected and accommodated.

The management of cultural diversity is an important chapter in every software professional's way to success. It not only creates a better working climate but also helps develop a range of skills that simply cannot be learnt on home soil. Tolerance, respect for differing views and opinions, unshackling mindsets, eradication of prejudices and bringing to the table different ways of thinking and working can help in increased productivity, make for better and informed decision making and nurture the cause of global business.

Especially in the IT industry we talk of global villages ... global villages are only possible through the development of a global mindset. This needs to be targeted as a niche area by HR departments for development of software professionals. This will not only bring in qualitative rewards but also quantitative, in terms of increased business through mining of existing customers. Every HR manager along with senior management should include this as his next topic for priority attention if he has not already done so. The effective management of cultural diversity will give a big fillip to the 'value' of our software exports.

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