

Excerpt from the booklet - 'Successful Offshore Outsourcing' published by the Institute of Directors , UK and Simmons & Simmons.

(The following excerpt from the above booklet has been Sunit Jilla's contribution to the 'culture factor' chapter)

"Vendors do make efforts in trying to solve these problems through training personnel, but it tends to be a one-off exercise, rather than an integral part of the company's strategy"

"Some British customers are put off by the subservience shown by Indian software developers. One of my clients in particular, is always taken aback when offshore team members insist on addressing him as "Sir" rather than by his first name. It has since taken him a while to get used to his newly conferred title! However, in India, this is a way of showing respect to customers or those senior to you and does not smack of subservience."

"Another important issue stemming from this culture of respect is perceived lack of democracy within the team. During project review meetings with customers, the vendor project managers did all the talking. This caused mistrust among the customer team, as they assumed that the juniors were not given a chance to air their views, and it seemed undemocratic."

However, Jilla warns about stereotyping. " There are vendors in India who are 'moderately business-focused', owing to their exposure of international clients."

"One more strong cultural difference between Indian and 'business focused' cultures is the means of delivering bad news. Indians are not accustomed to say 'no' or disagree on a professional level. They will say 'yes' and then state their differing view in written communication. This leads to much confusion and frustration."

Verbal communication

Where English is the second language, dialects, colloquialisms and local references are often the cause of miscommunication. Take the following examples:

- If someone has received 'a firing' in India it could mean only that he/she has been reprimanded. It would be common to say 'I fired him yesterday'.
- Indian business speakers and writers use words like 'prepone' (the logical opposite of postpone) and 'updation' (for the process of updating). Though unfamiliar, the meaning is usually obvious
- 'Relationship' is always assumed to be a 'business relationship' and does not connote anything else. Co-habitation is rare in Indian culture: you are either married, engaged or 'having an affair'.

Managing cultural risk

To avoid problems arising from cultural misunderstanding, ensure your company does the following:

- provides 'cultural sensitivity' training to all professionals involved in the evaluation and selection of offshore vendors and negotiation of offshore contracts
- Checks the company's cultural affinity and strategies for consistency to ensure that new recruits also get filtered through the training system. Beware of the 'culture savvy' marketing representative who may not truly represent the real face of the company
- Travels to supplier country to gauge cultural fit before finalising your supplier contract
- uses cultural affinity as a tool in the selection process
- provide regular 'cross-cultural training' to *all* professionals engaged with offshore teams. Several companies have specialised training programs on 'working with India'
- employs consultants with cross-cultural experience to bridge the cultural gaps during the project
- establishes structures and systems to avoid ambiguity in the spoken and written word. Always have a clear common process and methodology that standardises document formats and usage of terms to avoid misunderstandings
- schedules periodic visits in either direction for face-to-face meetings and to encourage rapport building between onshore and offshore team members

However, SME customers in particular should be aware, that while they are evaluating vendors, some vendors are cautious in deciding which customers *they* will work with. Some reputable vendors find that customers are not keen on investing in 'cross-cultural training' or tend to take the issues very lightly. Realising from past experience that this could cause serious problems, they are willing to forego that business. In such a case the customer may lose the opportunity of working with a robust vendor.