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From boundary spanning to creolization: A study of Chinese software and services outsourcing vendors

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ABSTRACT

In achieving success in global sourcing arrangements, the role of a cultural liaison, boundary spanner or transnational intermediary is frequently highlighted as being critical. This paper critiques, builds upon and synthesizes relevant streams of ideas in relation to boundary-spanning and cross-cultural management across a number of disciplines, and constructs a multi-layered creolization framework, encompassing processes at the individual, intra- and inter-organizational and inter-national levels which, we argue, are entangled and interrelated. Viewed as a vital and innovative phenomenon, creolization embodies the interactive, contentious and creative processes of network expansion, mutual sensemaking, cultural hybridity and identity multiplicity. Qualitative empirical data from the software and services outsourcing industry in Northwest China is used to demonstrate the complexity of cross-cultural practices in offshore collaborations and illustrate creolization processes. Potentials for theoretical development are outlined and implications for cross-cultural practices are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Investing in global sourcing relationships has become a critical part of an organization's overall strategy especially within the context of global competition, international movements of labor and interorganizational alliances. The scope of work covered by global sourcing arrangements ranges from routine IT-enabled tasks to more knowledge-intensive activities, which tend to encompass culturally embedded work practices. These culturally embedded work practices are difficult to disentangle from their context, requiring some degree of cultural understanding in order to provide successful resolution to conflicts of meaning and misinterpretations (Nicholson and Sahay, 2004; Oshri et al., 2007; Hong and Nguyen, 2009). The success of global software projects is thus often contingent on the achievement of sufficient mutual cultural understanding, which provides the basis of trust, knowledge sharing, and smooth collaboration.

Previous work on global sourcing and globally distributed work has provided empirical and practice-based examples of ways in which cross-cultural issues can be managed in cross-border alliances (Walsham, 2002; Krishna et al., 2004; Gregory et al., 2009). It is generally recognized that, in order to facilitate communication between offshore and onshore sites in globally distributed work arrangements, an individual or role is usually identified whose main purpose is to provide a single point of contact between the two organizational groups. This individual is variously referred to as a cultural liaison (Krishna

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et al., 2004; Levina and Kane, 2009), onsite coordinator (Carmel, 2006) or expatriate manager (Krishna et al., 2004; Levina and Kane, 2009). The responsibilities of the individual or role include bridging cultural disparities, managing communication between sites, helping to develop the onsite-offsite relationship and facilitating knowledge exchange. These activities are usually referred to as boundary-spanning (Levina and Kane, 2009; Gopal and Gosain, 2009).

While concepts like “boundary spanning” or “bridging” have been useful in theorizing about cross-cultural collaborations in offshore outsourcing processes, they are also limited by their emphasis on boundaries, separation of identity, and imagery associated with geographical dispersion such as bridges spanning wide gulfs (see also Yagi and Kleinberg’s 2011 analysis of the terms). Moreover, the majority of literature on boundary spanning has focused on individual qualities, capabilities and identity, with insufficient attention paid to the organizational, inter-organizational and international levels. In general, the literature on globally distributed work has failed to provide meaningful explanations of the complexities of intercultural collaboration inherent within these arrangements (Hinds et al., 2011).

It is thus argued in this paper that the cross-national and cross-cultural linkages established by “bridgeheads” can be anchored by the emergence of “cultural hybridity” that develops at the interface of cultures, customs, bodies of knowledge and institutional regimes. Drawing upon a wide range of literature from cultural studies, international business, and human resource management, and comparing and theorizing from our empirical data we propose the concept of “creolization” which encompasses interconnected concepts and processes identified in cross-cultural management of offshore outsourcing work. This paper suggests that within the context of an ongoing cross-cultural collaboration the assimilation of multiple cultural norms occurs at the individual, organizational, inter-organizational and international levels, that is, a multi-level analytical approach to cross-cultural collaboration can be envisioned.

Our empirical work is an exploratory study undertaken in a relatively new Chinese technology hub in Xi’an City, North-west China. The study investigates how Chinese software outsourcing suppliers construct practices and processes to navigate the complex cultural landscape representing the interface with their clientele. Our research objective is thus to examine how Chinese suppliers negotiate different emergent cultural practices in software and services outsourcing and to derive theoretical insights on the prevailing phenomenon of distributed collaboration in the context of technology-mediated globalization. The key contribution of this paper is the proposal of the creolization model which enriches our understanding of cross-cultural practices and processes in offshore outsourcing beyond the notion of boundary-spanning. In addition, the paper addresses two weaknesses in the extant literature: the area of global sourcing relationships from the vendor’s perspective is under-researched; and studies focusing on the Chinese software and services outsourcing (SSO) industry are sparse.

The following section critically reviews the concept of “boundary-spanning” in globally distributed work. The review provides a basis for the proposal of the “creolization” concept in the next section of the paper titled “From Boundary Spanning to Creolization”. The research approach is explained in Section 4, following which the study’s empirical findings are presented. Section 6 then elaborates on the creolization model after which the paper’s contributions to theory and practice are discussed. There is a final Section 9 summarizing the key points made in the paper and proposing further research in this area.

2. Boundary spanning

The concept of boundary spanning has appeared in the management literature for at least 30 years. It can refer to activities across organizational boundaries (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981) or intra-organizational activities, i.e. interactions between sub-units and groups (Schwab et al., 1985; Carlile, 2002). For example, “informational boundary spanning” is said to be performed by those well connected externally and internally (Tushman and Scanlan 1981). In the context of offshore outsourcing, the practice of boundary spanning has been recognized as critical in moderating the relationship between client and vendor with consequent impacts on project performance (Marchington et al., 2005; Levina and Vaast, 2008; Gopal and Gosain, 2009). Moreover, in addition to being knowledge intermediaries (Sahay et al., 2003; Nicholson and Sahay, 2004), boundary spanners also adopt the role of building trust relationships. A key driver of globally distributed work is the objective of leveraging the resources and skills of a cheaper, foreign location. Frequently highlighted in research on globally distributed work is the role of cultural liaisons, who are key actors (usually expatriates, inpatriates or repatriates), knowledgeable of both the offshore service provider’s and the client’s contexts, and who play “bridgehead” or “boundary spanning” roles (Krishna et al., 2004; Marchington et al., 2005; Mahnke et al., 2008; Levina and Kane, 2009; Gopal and Gosain, 2009; Nicholson, 2010).

Various competencies, predominantly technical (Tushman and Scanlan, 1981), have been associated with boundary spanners or bridgeheads. Among these competencies, cross-cultural skills have also been identified as critical to the effectiveness of boundary spanners, for example, in the case of expatriate managers (Harvey and Moeller, 2009). Indeed effective boundary spanners may be able to switch between various cultural identities thus integrating knowledge from different cultural perspectives (Brannen and Thomas, 2010; Hong, 2010; Yagi and Kleinberg, 2011). In the international management and cultural studies literature, types of individuals termed *biculturals* (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Bell and Harrison, 1996) are becoming a recommended choice for global work arrangements as transnational intermediaries and knowledge mediators, with an emphasis on their boundary spanning capabilities (Brannen and Thomas, 2010; Johnson and Duxbury, 2010; Lee, 2010; Yagi and Kleinberg, 2011). Although there is as yet no evidence of a deliberate strategy for global organizations to recruit such

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