

Communication in International SAP Projects

When Yes Means No



More and more often, a mixture of people from different countries take part in SAP projects. Cooperation in a culturally diversified environment gives grounds to new challenges in person-to-person communication.

Many a times SAP projects are implemented simultaneously in a number of corporate branches located in different countries. Even if a roll-out takes place in only one country, a common language has to be worked out by representatives of at least two countries: the local branch and the head office.

The same applies to SAP projects implemented with the involvement of specialists from Poland. For a number of years, employees of the Polish subsidiaries of multinational corporations and Polish SAP consultants have taken part in SAP roll-outs.

Recently, the opposite situation takes place more and more often. The Polish branches of multinational corporations gain importance and Polish businesses courageously expand onto foreign markets. In both cases, individual staff members or whole teams end up working on SAP projects abroad.

Hence, the number of SAP projects carried out in the international environment is growing. As a result, the ability to operate in a multicultural environment becomes crucial from the point of view of effective communication.

In order to work with geographically dispersed teams, one has to face a number of new challenges: a language barrier, social, economic, political and religious differences and also other factors, such as the time zones or different eating habits.

Challenging Communication

Communication is not easy even in traditional, mono-cultural IT projects. Most project managers point out communication as one of the key success factors, or even most critical success factor of any project.

Every experienced implementation team member can tell anecdotes on how everybody agrees on a certain method to do a task and then... each team proceeds in a completely different way.

To give you an example, an apparently clear message that “data migration” will be finished by 1st January can be interpreted by the client’s project manager as a “complete data history will be transferred from the current IT system”. To the financial consultants it may mean that “master data and open items will be migrated” and the logistic consultants may expect “only the master data to be migrated”.

If the project managers (both representing the client and the implementation partner) are not alert to traps of this kind, the project may be full of surprises – not necessarily pleasant ones...

Listen and Be Heard

Cross-cultural communication involves verbal and non-verbal interactions and the exchange of information and knowledge takes place between individuals with fundamentally different cultural background.

Since communication is a form of interaction, our relationships with other people are of crucial importance to its effectiveness. Do they hear and understand what we are trying to say? Do they listen? Do we listen to them? Do their answers prove that they understand the words we use and the meaning we are trying to convey? Is their approach positive and open? Do we trust each other?

The Same Words, Different Meanings

Inability to communicate beyond the cultural divide is often a major source of cross-cultural problems in multinational projects. Different reasons may stand behind this inability or absence of communication, such as:

- differences in the body language. The same gestures can have different meanings. For example, the Bulgarians nod their heads to show they disagree with something. The Chinese count from one to ten using fingers of one hand – where the thumb and the index finger shown at the same time mean eight. The same gesture in France would mean two and in North America would be understood as pointing a gun at somebody.
- differences in the meaning of the same word. Just like the gestures, words can be interpreted differently too. The word “exciting”, for example, is used in a different way in the UK and in the US.

While the management of US companies always talk about “exciting challenges”, the British use the word to describe children’s play (in the UK children do exciting things and not the managerial cadre);

- different approach to the same situations. Depending on their background, various people will interpret a situation differently. In Poland, for example, a black cat crossing your way means bad luck, while in the UK the same sight is supposed to bring good fortune.

These are just examples of cultural diversity. Such striking discrepancies in communication are usually identified quickly, however, more subtle and complex differences can be perceived after a considerable time when corrective measures already require significant efforts and expenditures. Sometimes, the differences are spotted too late and, as a result, deadlines for completion of tasks are not met.

Overcoming the Barriers

It’s better to know when somebody nodding their head means ‘no’. It is worthwhile to see the difference between someone who does not look you straight in the eyes to show respect and someone who is trying to hide something or deceive you.

The handful of examples quoted here illustrates how many barriers can emerge in cross-cultural communication. Such barriers should be skillfully identified and overcome as soon as possible to ensure successful completion of a project.

The only way to communicate effectively in multicultural projects is to show interest in the unknown culture, devote time to learn it and understand the differences.

Project manager should prepare an information package for project participants from other countries including the basic rules of communication and conduct in the target country. Such preparatory work should help to avoid a number of traps and misunderstandings in the future.



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