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Succeeding in a Global Economy

Cultural Differences

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Working in different countries or dealing with visiting overseas clients requires building a specialized set of skills. Adapting to the overseas clients' technical requirements can be achieved by simply researching the country's climate, culture, technical sophistication, etc. But often it is the skills involved in dealing with social and cultural factors that can make or break deals.

I have seen people relocate to work in foreign countries and decide to pack and go home within a short period of time. In many cases, this happens because they either did not give themselves enough time to adapt, or looked at what was happening around them as “my way” versus “the wrong way.”

Language, etiquette and socializing habits need to be well developed to aid in building solid friendships and carry out business with other countries. English language probably is the most common business language. However, English-speaking professionals should not assume that their non-native English speaking clients must sort out their language problems.

While we may not need to learn a clients' native language, we will need to ensure that we use English in a manner that helps place all parties at ease and enhance the whole communication experience. In general, companies do their best to employ good English-speaking professionals, yet their level of English language proficiency can vary.

In all cases, it is important to appreciate that English is not the native language of that country and while some professionals may speak well, they do not share exactly the same language thinking process

or logic. As a result they may not structure their thoughts very well, in English.

In general, until you determine your client's level of English language proficiency try to speak at a slower pace than normal, try to pronounce words clearly and stay away from language expressions that may be interpreted differently by others. In one instance a client got offended when he was told “put yourself in my shoes.” The client only understood the physical meaning of the statement! Luckily, the English-speaking professional realized the change in his client's facial expressions and body language and quickly, explained, apologized and managed to flip a tense situation into a fun one.

Common sense is another aspect that needs to be checked when doing business with other nations. Although we share similar definition of common sense, it is advisable to take some time to watch how people react to issues such as presenting ideas, heated discussions and criticism. Remember that while it is common sense to one party, it may be nonsense to the other. Technical common sense could also differ between different regions.

Punctuality and timekeeping attitude need to be studied. Different cultures have varying perspectives of punctual-

ity. In Location A, a 9 a.m. meeting may mean it's important to arrive five minutes before 9 a.m.; however, in Location B a 9 a.m. meeting could start anytime between 9 and 9:30 a.m. Surely, you can do something to improve the situation, but only after you have gained your client's respect and friendship.

Age is another important factor. You need to understand your clients' perspective of age. This is particularly important for managerial meetings or positions. While some cultures only look for the person who can do the job properly, other cultures may connect age with professional abilities. Usually, professionals in their late thirties and above are considered acceptable in higher managerial positions, in these cultures.

Socializing and establishing friendship is an important part of the business development. It is important that this social part is practiced correctly to ensure that it achieves the required results. Many factors can be listed under socializing such as choosing the venue, type of food and beverage offered, as well as interaction with the opposite gender. When dealing with a new culture, it is advisable to watch and develop an understanding of preferences, interests and what is forbidden. Ask other expatriate professionals if possible. If still in doubt, ask your foreign client whether he/she is happy with the proposed arrangements.

Restaurants seem to be the most common venues for business social events. Whether you are inviting two people or 20, there are few things that you need to consider when selecting the venue for your business guests. While the majority of people are open to most food styles and are willing to try new ones, it is important to ask your guests if they are happy with the proposed cuisine. This can save you

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the disappointment of discovering that your guests do not eat Indian, Chinese, or Mexican cuisines, or that they don't eat seafood. Availability of vegetarian food is a plus as, nowadays, we may meet more vegetarian people for health or religious reasons. Alcohol is another important item as some people do not drink alcohol.

Try to build good understanding of how a culture perceives interaction with the other gender. In some cultures, it is always preferred to have a female member of the host company present when inviting female members of the client company.

On the technical side, the list of items to keep in mind is quite long and could make huge impact on your business development effort. Your overseas clients should feel that you are totally aware of their local, cultural, economical, climate, prevailing design standards and regulations, special design needs, preferred communication and information transfer methods. Issues such as payback period, energy conservation, use of economy cycles, equipment brands, renovation versus demolition, system selection and others need to be viewed from the client's perspective.

What applies to a certain region as feasible or practical may well be unaccepted or represent uncommon practice in another region. Working with overseas clients is a great opportunity to transfer knowledge and learn to look at problems from totally different perspectives.

While some client requests may seem highly unrealistic or even opposes the project's interest, you still need to give these requests thorough consideration. It is important to understand the client's explanation of his/her requests and advise whether you agree or disagree with the proposed idea. This will enhance the design output. More important, it strengthens the business confidence with the client through showing that all effort is being made to give them system designs that serve their needs best.

Different regions appreciate payback periods differently. For certain systems or equipment types, a four to five year payback period is considered quite satisfactory. In other regions this period is considered too long and does not warrant the added capital cost. One to two years is considered good.

Everyone seems to agree on the benefits of economy cycles. However, I have seen them installed in extreme environments where they end up running for few days per year, leading to a very long payback period, probably longer than the main system can survive. It is important to simulate the operation of the proposed economy cycle against the project's geographical location and climate. Assuming that it is feasible based on our home environment could lead to incorrect decisions.

Discuss with the client the added advantages of building management and control systems versus the added maintenance as a result of introducing motorized dampers, sensors, variable frequency drives and other control system components. In some countries, due to lack of specialized maintenance and substandard preventive maintenance practices, clients may prefer simplified control systems.

While some regions seem to go as far as possible towards renovating and expanding existing building systems to suit building changes or expansions, other regions seem to find it

easy to decide to demolish existing systems and install new ones.

Building system designs usually are based on certain equipment manufacturer. Generally, we base the design on our preferred local manufacturer's products. With overseas projects, it is important to liaise with the client to get his/her opinion on the brand of the major equipment to be installed in the project.

On the one hand, there is no point basing the design on equipment that may be totally different to the ones that are available locally or the product that the client prefers to use. On the other hand, it is important to advise the client of any special features, added benefits or higher efficiency that can be achieved by using a product that we are familiar with. This ensures that the client is getting the best service and the business relationship is improved. Also, it represents an opportunity to create a new market for our home products in a new overseas market if the client is convinced that the product will serve his needs better.

Review your standard construction details to ensure that they suit and apply to the project's overseas climate and special conditions. An outside air intake sand louver is not required for a project located in Auckland, New Zealand. Similarly an expensive weather louver with rainwater eliminators may be overkill for the amount of rain that falls in Dubai.

How to communicate with your overseas clients and how to present proposals and system design documents can make big difference to your business relationship. While electronic communication is becoming the main communication method, some high level managers may still prefer phone calls followed by written confirmation to discuss issues. Transferring design documents by e-mail or using dedicated websites are widely used; however, in some regions project managers still prefer to receive hard copies of the design documents for each design stage.

Local ASHRAE chapters in overseas countries can be great source of information to the individual professional and engineering firms. ASHRAE chapters can provide ample country-specific, cultural and technical information in addition to invaluable opportunities for professional networking.

ASHRAE Region-At-Large has more than 23 local chapters in Poland, Romania, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Qatar, Kuwait, Dubai, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. ASHRAE Region XIII has seven chapters in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

These local chapters are always seeking to welcome members and non-member professionals. You can also support local ASHRAE chapters, as they are always looking for specialized professionals and equipment manufacturers to take part in the chapters' technical events and technology transfer presentations.

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