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THE IMPACT OF CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

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THE IMPACT OF CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS
CASE STUDY: INTEGRATION PROJECT AT ÖSSUR COMPANY

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the last decades, we can say the world has become smaller, among other things due to globalization, new technology, and better transportation. Organizations are seeking new markets, open economic areas with people working in different countries, and increasingly working in cross-border projects. The international growth of Icelandic companies has also been extremely fast in the last fifteen years (Adalsteinsson & Gudlaugsson, 2007) and has brought new challenges to the Icelandic working environment.

A case study was conducted at Össur, an international non-invasive orthopaedics company, with its headquarters located in Iceland. Five employees were interviewed and results from retrospective meetings are also part of the research. The findings of the research indicate that national culture has an impact on the progress of international projects and needs to be further investigated. Icelandic culture by itself, when Icelandic project managers are leading international projects, does not have an impact on the progress of the project; it’s more the fact that all project managers need to train themselves in leadership, being adaptable, flexible and having the ability to understand each individual of a project team and respect their opinion that matters. Another finding of this research is that organizational culture can have an even larger impact on the progress of the project, especially if the organizational structure is dysfunctional in some way.
1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a complex concept and has played an important part in management research over recent decades. Culture is a phenomenon that can be defined and understood in many ways. Organizations usually have their own culture and even in a global organization, they can experience different cultures in each individual company of the group. With globalization, local companies of a global organization become more often part of international projects, providing more opportunities as well as challenges to the people working in them. Having had the opportunity to work in the international environment for the last fifteen years, and having experienced many different cultures, people with various nationalities, different background and personalities, I have personally gathered a great deal of knowledge and feel able to better understand the challenges of international cooperation. The objective of this research is to explore the challenges organizations are facing in international projects and to examine if Icelandic culture is in any way different from other nations and has an impact on the progress of international projects Icelanders are leading. To gain a deeper understanding of the subject a case study was conducted at Össur, a global company with its headquarters located in Iceland. This was an integration project which took place in the last quarter of 2016 of a newly acquired company integrated into existing processes at Össur, and had an impact on several locations in the world. Five participants were interviewed to get a better insight of the topic, and also results from two retrospective meetings held in December 2016 were examined.

The focus of this paper is to analyse and understand culture and other challenges organizations which project managers are experiencing in international projects, and how project managers can improve themselves to be better prepared to lead projects in a global environment; how should organizations choose people to lead and which competencies do project managers need to fulfil when they lead international projects in the future.

The research questions are following:

*Does culture have an impact on the progress of international projects?*

*How far do perspectives of Icelandic culture act as an enabler and / or disabler in international projects?*
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the focus is on the challenges project managers leading teams with members of different nationality and diverse culture may experience when leading international projects. The structure of national culture is examined, with a focus on Icelandic culture, and how culture can impact international projects.

Leadership in international projects

Working in international projects can add a series of leadership challenges to people’s work, such as additional distant locations, an increased number of different organizations, more culture differences, different languages as well as range of time zones. Distant locations can, for example, be a barrier in relationship building and a number of different organizations can have result in more competing interests and hidden agendas (Binder, 2007). An important success factor in the performance of an organization is accepted to be leadership (Müller & Turner, 2010), and for projects, it will be the same. Project managers with certain personal qualities will lead projects more successfully than others (Müller & Turner, 2010, Dulewicz & Higgs, 2005). Binder (2007) defined leadership as the creation of a vision about project objectives that directs all team members to work towards it. Müller & Turner (2010) also add the ability to motivate the team to work together to achieve goals, take responsibility and lead people into the same direction, whilst at the same time a project manager having the ability to apply knowledge as well as tools and techniques.

These challenges increase the effort and requirements on project managers and their leadership capability as opposed to pure technical capability, which thus becomes even more of a critical success factor in international projects. A project manager’s primary role and responsibility are usually to ensure the project execution with specified deliverables, ready within the planned time and budget. Project managers, therefore, play a critical role today in an organization to achieve success in a competitive environment where they must be the leader, organizer, and planner, all at the same time. They become the focal point of the project, the source of communication and information for the project stakeholders (McHenry, 2008).

Unfortunately, project managers are often trained on the job with little or no formal education or training within the project management discipline. As a result, they often must attain and maintain their skills which are part specialist, and part attitude (Robertson, 2004). Effective project managers act as change leaders because they are usually managing one-time events with a relatively short-time frame to improve the organization’s standing. They have to make important decisions, often impacting the cost and schedule of a project, based on little data. Additionally, analyses are often with short notice, working with people at different organizational levels and various culture. Therefore, a project manager’s knowledge, skills, and abilities must be many, varied, and highly tuned. Project managers possessing only technical skills, are therefore, unprepared to successfully meet the clients and corporate conditions in project management. In the progressively diverse global environment of today, diversified competencies and skills are ever more essential to project manager success than before (McHenry, 2008).
Culture

According to the literature on culture, the globe is said to be composed of many different culturally distinct countries (Aðalsteinsson, 2011). Geert Hofstede (1991) cross-cultural research gives insights into other cultures and offers people an opportunity to be more effective when interacting with people in other countries and multinational organizations by broadening understanding of cultural diversity. If understood and applied properly, this information can reduce levels of frustration, anxiety, and concern. Hofstede identified four dimensions from his well-known study in the years 1967 - 1973 from 116.000 employees at IBM, a multinational global organization in more than 40 countries. The aim of the study was to analyse how a company’s values are influenced by national cultural background. Based on later studies two more dimensions were added. When Hofstede defines a nation it is said to be determined by a common language, a shared literary heritage, written language, education system, media and legal system. The six dimensions are:

**Power distance index (PDI)** – this refers to the degree of inequality that exists and is accepted, among people with and without power. A low PDI means that power is shared and well dispersed and the member of the society view themselves as equals. Organizations are flatter and supervisors and employees are considered almost as equals.

**Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)** – this refers to the strength of the ties people have to others within the community. A high IDV score indicates a loose connection with people but a society with low IDV score would have strong group cohesion, a large amount of loyalty and respect for a member of a team.

**Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)** – this refers to the distribution of emotional roles between genders in a society, how much a society sticks with and values traditional male and female roles. A society with low MAS woman has equal rights as men and men are allowed to be sensitive.

**Uncertainty/Avoidance index (UAI)** – this refers to how much tolerance society has for uncertainty and unknown situations and degree of anxiety society members feel in these situations. Nations with high UAI-scoring are governed by rules and order when low scoring nations encourage to discover their own truth.

**Long term Orientations versus short term normative orientation (LTO)** – this refers to how much a society values the future rewards versus the short term were people in society looks more towards the past and present. A society with high LTO is a society where the family is the basis of society and show high respect for traditions.

**Indulgence versus restraint (IND)** – this refers to a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives to enjoy life and having fun. On the other end, restraint stands for a society with strict social norms (Geert-hofstede.com)
Even though Hofstede model has been criticized, these dimensions can be used as indications of how the national culture may be lived and experienced, and the model can be used as an introductory frame for managers and in the academic world (Aðalsteinsson, 2011).

Hofstede (1991) cited:
   Studying culture without experiencing culture shock is like practising to swim without water.

Analysis of Icelandic culture is not available from Hofstede’s research. Indeed, very little research have been conducted to analyse Icelandic culture using these dimensions. A study was done by Gylfi Dalmann Aðalsteinsson (2011) to investigate the characteristics of Icelandic National culture. Data from 427 students at the University of Iceland was analysed using a questionnaire VSM 94 from Hofstede. According to the results, Icelandic national culture can be characterized in the following to the first five dimensions:

According to the results, Icelandic national culture can be characterized by low power distance (PDI), high individualism (IDV), low masculinity (MAS), high un-certainty-avoidance (UAI) and average long-term orientation (LTO).

Edgar Henry Schein (1992) suggests that culture can be analysed as a phenomenon which surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others. His perspective on culture is specific as he claims that culture can be brought to the level of the organization and even down to groups within the organization, and that one can see clearly how it is created, embedded, developed, and ultimately manipulated, managed, and changed. These dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make one realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin. Schein considers that organizational culture is the foundation for all organizational success but as well the most difficult part to change in an organization. Notably, Schein admits that the term ‘culture’ has many meanings and connotations. When it is applied to groups and organizations it is difficult to define unambiguously.

Corporate culture is often viewed as a system of values, beliefs attitudes, perceptions, symbols, communication patterns and behaviours and has been split into three levels (Hofstede, 1991). The first level consists of artifacts that can be seen, found out and discovered by outsiders. The second level consists of espoused values, the organization’s goals and strategies. The third and last level consists of the basic underlying assumptions of the organizational culture that are difficult to discover in daily business and interactions between employees. Organizational culture is usually also impacted of the surrounding and often invisible, intangible force that drives the organization.

Looking at the Icelandic culture it has been described as a family culture, based on a small community where everybody knows everybody, managers are informal and people have easy access to people and all communicational channels are short (Adalsteinsson & Gudlaugsson, 2007)
3. METHOD

The objectives of the research are to explore the impact that culture can have on the progress of international projects and if Icelandic culture is in any way having an impact when Icelanders are leading international projects. Many types of research exist about culture, teamwork, and politics in companies but to be able to focus on and explore the Icelandic culture when leading international teams a case study was conducted at the company Óssur in the last quarter of 2016. This was an integration program were newly acquired companies were integrated into existing processes (S&M, R&D, M&O, and finance) at Óssur in different locations of the world and led by headquarters located in Iceland. First of all, it will be explored if the Icelandic culture has any impact on the leadership and whether the culture of the program participants has an impact on the progress of the program and can it be managed. Furthermore, it will be examined which other factors have the biggest impact on the success of the program. In the case study, the focus is on the integration of one of the entities that took place in last quarter of 2016.

The sample of the research consists of 5 employees at Óssur all participants in the integration program, the program owner, the program manager, two project managers and one core team member. Three of the interviewees are Icelandic and two from western Europe to be able to get different perspectives on the Icelandic culture. Four of them have experience in leading and working in international teams and one interviewer has experience from highly complex locally run projects before attending the integration program at Óssur. These persons were chosen because of their role in the project and experience in their existing and previous jobs and as well having the sample of a different nationality.

In end of December 2016, a retrospective meetings were held within the teams in Iceland and Europe locations and are the results from these meetings part of this research.

Research methodology

To collect the data for the research, a qualitative research method was used to explore and get insight from the participants in the project. In-depth, face-to-face, semi constructed interviews were chosen. That method gives the interviewees opportunity to express themselves more freely concerning the subject and to reflect on things which they believe are important (Halldórsdóttir, 2016).

The five interview were conducted in a two week period end of March 2017 and all took place face to face. The interview was structured in three different sections and took approximately one hour each and was made in confidentiality. All the interviews were recorded. The questions were prepared beforehand and were used as guidelines in the interviews (the list of questions can be found in the appendix). The first section covered the personal profile, to gain information on the background of the interviewee, how long he has worked at Óssur and his experience working in international projects. The second section was to examine the impact of Icelandic culture and to have the interviewee opinion
about the strengths and weakness of being an Icelandic project manager in international projects. Furthermore, to explore what other factors are most likely to have an impact on the progress of an international project and is it important to manage culture. The third and the last section was more focused on the case study itself and the learning and success from the project at Össur and what were the main challenges looked at from different angles, scope, leadership, teamwork, communication, and culture.

It is though important to note that due to the limited number of interviews, the interview outcome has certainly no statistical relevance. However, the answers give a good indication of the research question. The fact that the researcher was part of the integration program might also have some limitation to the answers but more likely is thought that it has given more open and deeper answers to the questions.

The retrospective meetings were held by the program manager end of December 2016 and ten participants from different work streams of the project delivered their feedback from their journey. The focus was on to give positive feedback, what could have been done differently and things to improve in future projects and integrations.

**Company**

Össur is a leading global company in non-invasive orthopaedics. Össur delivers advanced and innovative technologies within the fields of lower extremity prosthetics, braces, supports, and compression therapy. The company was founded in 1971 in Iceland and named after the founder Össur Kristinsson, an Icelandic prosthetist who developed silicone interface for prosthetic sockets. Össur has over 2700 employees in over 20 countries and has extensive operations in the Americas, EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) and Asia-Pacific, with numerous distributors in other markets. The company’s headquarters are located in Reykjavík Iceland. The company has grown fast over the last 20 years, since it was listed on the Icelandic stock exchange, with a combination of organic growth and acquisitions, over 20 acquisitions have been completed over the past 15 years. The company has a flat hierarchy, that empowers employees on all level, together with a strong values, honesty, frugality and courage. The values are the foundation of the company’s strategy and success. The culture of the company mirrors the values, where honesty means that people respect by adhering to facts and reality and by admitting failures. By frugality, the company will use their resources wisely, minimize cost across all areas of its business through effective communication, preparedness, planning and optimized processes. With courage the company want’s people to be open to change and constant improvements. Employees challenge by unwritten rules, show initiative and should take risk, while at the same time, take responsibility for their ideas, decisions, and actions.
4. RESULTS

In this chapter the main results from the interviews and the retrospective meetings are presented. The chapter will be structured according to the sections in the interview:

- Personal profile
- The impact of Icelandic culture in international projects, does that matter?
- Success and learning from the integration project at Óssur

**Personal profile**

The aim of this section was to understand and get insight into the interviewee’s experience as leaders in international projects, their time at Óssur and other professional experience.

The interviewees have all long experience in their profession all over 10 years, as project managers, marketing directors, leaders in M&A projects, managers as well as having been leading and participating in international teams and projects. All of them are working at Óssur today and have been working for the company from few months the employee with the shortest time at Óssur up to 16 years.

**Impact of culture on international projects**

The word culture is complicated word and has so many meanings in those interviewed. All of the interviewees mentioned the values of individuals and as well the company values as part of the culture. Languages, human interaction, and behaviour, masculinity, hierarchy and power was mentioned as well.

Unwritten rules on how we work and behave in this company, sometimes it is reflected in the values of the companies.

Communication between people, traditions, and customs of how people behave, also related to hierarchy. How do people react to the hierarchy in companies, can vary from country to country or from company to company, when are people ready to make decisions on their own?

All interviewees agree that it’s very important to focus and study the cultural background of team members. They believe that it will help them to better understand other participants’ perspectives, make communication easier and give them the opportunity to prepare, for example, to deal with challenges connected to different time-zones, traditions, customs, and when power in the company and communication lines are different those shown by the organizational chart. In their mind, the power, the politic, and level of support for a project are even more important than an individual’s culture on the progress of the project. When asked about the importance of focusing on and studying culture, the interviewees came up with following quotes:
General assessment needs to be good to understand dynamics, what will make the project progress and what will make it struggle. Look a bit into the people and spend time with human resources department mapping the people, who drive the project and manage it accordingly.

Be aware of the cultural difference but even more important to focus on the company culture. Believe that organizational dynamic and values have more impact than national culture and therefore need to be investigated. In the end, you are working with people.

Culture is important but most important to learn to know people participating in the project. Most often it is a conflict between people that can easily be avoided. Allow people to participate, inform them and keep them part of the project.

Extremely important, everyone needs to take into account different culture. When dealing with different time zones like 7-8 hours difference, communication becomes even more complicated and more difficult to find time for meetings and little time left for bonding with small talks.

The interviewees all had strong opinion on what things are specific to Icelandic culture when coming to working in teams and international projects. They believe that the fact Icelanders are raised on an island and have had during the centuries to fight and struggle a little with other nations has had an impact on behaviour. More often companies are small in Iceland and people work on several tasks in the same process, or on a different project in the company rather than being able to focus on specific parts of a process. Words mentioned describing Icelandic culture are: flexibility, resilience, enthusiasm, self-confident, honesty, intolerance, lack of respect to the hierarchy, short term thinking and chaotic.

Icelanders see themselves as open to “new” generally, open to everything almost. They are innovative and out of the box and have no limits when comes to solving things. They are problem-solving and don’t like to be told things are not possible. They are usually self-confident and the culture is you can talk to anybody, doesn’t matter where you are in the organizational chart. On the other side, they can be short term thinking and chaotic when solving things.

Icelandic culture is to have an opinion and being honest, you are not afraid of expressing yourself and to everybody, no hierarchy limits. They are more focused on solving and work as a part of a team, helping with solving issues, rather than saying this is not my business. Icelanders do though not always respect the hierarchy and do not involve the right people when making decisions or make decisions late in the process.
One of the strengths Icelanders have when working in international projects is the adaptability, willing to try to understand other cultures and are not stuck in specific culture or way of doing things. Ready to play with the different cultures and find the best in both worlds.

Of course, not all Icelanders are the same, they are all individuals and are just different even though they are the same nationality.

When it comes to the question if interviewees believe that they can manage culture in international projects they had a slightly different opinion on how or if it can be managed.

Don’t think we can manage culture, but we can control it. The basic in culture is always there but we can control it in projects, by having plans how to deal with different culture. The governance structure needs to be setup and clear from the beginning and decisions which process the company is going to follow. Let’s though face it that we will be dealing with these issues throughout the project but then better to have the plan clear.

Difficult to change the culture, but yes it’s manageable by educating yourself on the other party and persons you are working with. Prepare yourself with good questions that will help you to understand and be able to put yourself in the other party shoes. Start by looking at the individual and then who the person reports to and their relationship. Believe it’s though more the company culture than the national culture. We will never be able to change people we need to adapt to a person character. It comes a little bit different when you are working in international projects within the same organization you get to know people and can build on from earlier projects and as well are more aware of the organizational culture and structure.

Important to listen and read into situations before you act, being diplomatic and humble. Simple and clear communication in oral and followed-up in written, clear on the structure and always clear on next steps and timeline.

The interviewees do not think that a project being led by Icelanders and / or an Icelandic headquarters had an impact on the progress of the project. More significant was that fact that a headquarters led the project as a global project, thus giving the project more power in the organization and a high priority in all locations.

Headquarters are the neutral part in the company when it comes to the power struggle between local units, the organization is functionally organized and having headquarters in the middle helps to bridge the gaps between the geographical structure. Having headquarters in lead creates teamwork and will hopefully help us with other projects as well in the future.
If acquired company is supposed to be part of the consolidation and integrated into all markets it’s important to run a project like this globally, it helps to keep things in more balance and also with the fact how difficult it has been to implement the global thinking into the local units.

Less the fact that we are Icelandic than just being the headquarters. Being located in Iceland may though cause some isolation from the local units where the action is, so it’s very important to show presence in the local units during the project time.

Not necessarily the fact of Icelandic leadership or Icelandic headquarters it’s more that it is headquarters and the struggle within the organization between the local units and headquarters, who has the power and the politic in the organization. At the same time, we have strong power and company culture in our local units we are trying to align with global processes.

**Success and learning from the integration project at Össur**

Part of the case study was to explore the impact of having Icelanders and Icelandic headquarters to lead the integration project at Össur, or if other factors had more impact on project success. The fact that the project had a very strict timeline was seen as probably having the biggest impact on the project, it’s planning, and execution. This was the first integration project led by the headquarters in the organization, and the team in the local organization closest to the acquired company felt that they were sidelined. The participants felt the main challenges in this project were the timeline, teamwork with different time zones and dealing with the power struggle and politics in the company, all within short timelines.

Having headquarters to take over the project from the local unit after they started, affected and delayed some of the processes, but was at the same time necessary to be able to align globally and to focus on all sales areas in the integration from the beginning. That also caused some trust issues from the business, the conflict between headquarters and local units not trusting the headquarters to understand the local business and sales. Again facing the battle of power and politic in the company as the company has strong local units. But by running the project globally it also allowed involving the global functions, such as IT, quality and R&D earlier in the process. The governance structure was set up and was clear, with an end to end processes. The fact that the structure of the project was not aligned with the organizational structure caused some issues and was difficult to run the project at the same time fighting with a process that was not accepted in the organization. People felt other were taking over their role and were not sure what they were responsible for, causing unnecessary conflicts. It is very important to have the governance structure clear but the time was too short to take the battles during the project.
One of the learnings from this project was that it is important to have a project like this well structured and involve the right people as early in the process as possible. Having it managed by the program office of the company, with professional people used to running projects was a significant success factor, and helped to keep people focused and prioritize the tasks.

Good learning from this project, important to have the correct prioritization, only focus on one project at the time and finish. People learned how to work on global level and how important it is to have global processes approved and accepted by all units. Managed to change some people way of thinking and move away from local functional business to end to end processes.

Most of the things went well, we managed to finish in time and start to sell from day one, using Össur processes. People are more aware of the limits in our processes, what needs to improve and to be able to run integration projects like this smoothly we need to align our processes and improve our scalability. The company needs to focus on the culture of participants and plan and spend time on investigating the acquired company.

For headquarters to keep their neutral position they need to travel more and spend time in the local units and work from there to create more global and unified organization.

Important to learn from this journey and create a playbook, well-organized structure and plan to use in future acquisitions. Also critical to keep the knowledge the team has achieved from this project and build on for the future.

5. DISCUSSION

The result shows that the participants are well aware that culture can have an impact on international projects and when working with different nationalities in a team. All of them think about how they can prepare and achieve better understanding when working with a different culture. When looking at the definition of the term culture, it’s clear that we need to look into several areas of human behaviour and the environment in projects, and critically examine the use of the term culture in order not to fall into stereotyping. Despite that fact that project professionals work with those from a different national culture, it is important to keep in mind that all individuals in projects can be different, even with the same nationality, with their own character and behaviours. Bob Dignen (2016) says in his book Leading International Projects, it’s necessary to generalize but at the same time it can be dangerous.

This goes to the heart of human knowledge: we build expertise with our experience but any current or future reality may disprove all that hard-won expertise, so openness needs to sit alongside confidence.
The research shows that the company culture has as big or even bigger influence on the project outcome than national culture and needs to be taken into account. All companies have their own culture, usually highly influenced by the company’s values. In this research, the sample was all employees from the same company and that might have reflected the answers when discussing culture. Össur values are strong and have been the same over the last two decades, honesty, frugality, and courage. Having in addition strong local units with their own culture and local goals has also a huge impact on the cooperation in Össur’s global projects. Understanding the background of all projects is a key to success, to fully understand the situation or circumstances, the official and unofficial rules, roles of participants, the level of trust, as well as the commitment of employees and the company towards the project (Dignen & Wollmann, 2016).

Part of this research was to examine the impact of the Icelandic culture when Icelandic project managers are leading international projects; whether this is a significant factor. The answers from participants when they were asked about Icelander’s advantages and disadvantages when working in projects were exceptionally well aligned, giving the indication that Icelanders have some typical behaviour or way of acting when working in projects. Pinto and Slevin (1987) identify the ten most important factors that lead to the success of a project as having clearly defined goals and benefits from the beginning; secondly, that the top management supports; third, to plan and schedule the project; fourthly, effective client consultation; fifthly, personnel issues, like selection of team members, recruitment, and training. The latter five factors related to personnel having the knowledge to perform the technical tasks, client acceptance, monitoring, with feedback the eight factor. Ninth is communication with the last one cited as the ability to anticipate problems when they arise and be able to solve them with an open mind. Looking at these factors it’s hard to say that an individual from a specific national culture is better or worse at project management. It’s more important for project managers to focus on self-awareness, their own culture, know their advantages and disadvantages as team members, and at the same time, look into and manage the factors mentioned above. Some of the factors are more related to a company environment. The management team of a company is responsible for creating the best environment for the project team to work in, selecting the right and most suitable project members, and showing full support. As mentioned, the research shows that project managers are not only working with and challenged by national culture but organizational culture as well. Organizational culture is often impacted of power plays and politics within multinational organizations which can affect the progress of a project, with timelines often too short and pressures related to organizational structure and governance.

When we focus on learning from the integration project at Össur, it’s important to recognise how mature a company and processes need to be to run an integration project like this successfully, especially in such a short time period. The company should be aware of where it needs to improve and increase scalability in its processes and how ready or not it is for globally aligned processes. It’s important to be sufficiently aligned in data structures and setups of systems and processes, and show a willingness and capacity to collaborate across silos. The short timeline in this project put a lot of pressure on the team.
and the whole business. Looking back, the interviewees were though confident that having a fixed and short timeline creates more positive impacts than negative. The short timeline helps the team to keep focus and prioritize and stick to the scope of the project. The negative risk is that time for preparation was too short and the tendency was to go straight into execution instead of spending time to explore the culture and needs of the acquired company, set up effective lines of communication and to get to know the project team at the beginning and build strong relationships. With the short timeline came also the danger of forgetting the joy of working in the project. The focus on execution meant that the celebration of the success of a reached milestone can be left out. One of the biggest learnings from this project and former integrations at Össur is to recognise the importance of looking at an integration as a global project managed by the program office like all other projects in the organization, having the team focused for a certain time of period as well as having resources dedicated only to the project for the time needed. It’s important to avoid focusing on and making decisions based on product or market synergies only; culture, personnel issues and organisational growth are also very important. In the end, it is important to learn from such a journey and use the experience in the future acquisitions and other projects within the company.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Culture is complicated and can be defined in many ways. In international projects, we can feel both national and organizational culture make things even more complicated and challenging. The objective of this research was to explore if culture has an impact on the progress of international projects and if Icelandic culture has in any way effect when Icelandic project managers are leading international projects. The findings are that culture can have an impact on the progress and cause delays and affect success if project managers and companies do not prepare, do not respect other people and their opinions, or do not plan for a different culture. Another finding is that organizational culture can have an even bigger impact on the progress, especially if the organizational structure is dysfunctional in some way. In fast-growing organizations, we can see growing pains, coming from locally run companies, with their own history, embedded silo thinking, which affect adversely international group consolidation at a structural and process level.

The research shows that Icelandic culture alone does not have an impact on the progress, when Icelandic project managers are leading international projects. In Icelandic culture, we can argue for both good qualities and as well some behaviour which might seem strange or rude to other nations. The challenge for project managers, no matter which nationality, is to train in leadership, be adaptable, flexible, show others respect and always keep in mind the impact of culture on all projects, both international and local, within which even diverse departmental cultures can be faced. In the end, we always need to keep in mind when working in projects, international or not, that we are working with people and by showing them respect and promote, we can lead our projects worth greater impact and deeper meaning.
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8. REFERENCES

9. APPENDIX

Below is the list of questions which was used as guidelines in the interviews.

Research questions:

Does culture have an impact on the progress of international projects?

How far do perspectives of Icelandic culture act as an enabler and/or disabler in international projects?

Section 1: Personal profile

✓ Your personal background:
  - What is your current position at Össur?
  - How long have you worked at Össur?
  - What kind of international projects have you worked in both at Össur and other companies?
  - How complex were they, in the range of 1 – 10?

Section 2: Impact of Icelandic culture in international projects (Does it matter)

✓ What do you understand by the term culture?
✓ What aspect of Icelandic culture is the biggest advantage and disadvantage in international projects? Can you name 3 items for advantages and 3 items for disadvantages
✓ What do you see as strengths being Icelandic PM of international teams?
✓ What do you see as weaknesses being Icelandic PM of international teams?
✓ Do you think you can manage culture in international projects, if yes what tools do you use?
✓ How important/useful is it to focus on the issue of culture in projects? Why?
✓ What impact do you believe Icelandic leadership and Icelandic headquarters had on the progress of the project?
  - Positive
  - Negative
✓ Do you believe that there were other things affecting the progress of this project?
Section 3: Success and learning from the project

✓ What was your biggest learning from this project?
   - Would you do anything differently if starting again?
   - What wouldn’t you do?
✓ What did you experience as main challenges in the project, thinking of following:
   - Scope
   - Leadership
   - Teamwork
   - Communication
   - Culture
   - Other
✓ Would you advise the program owner to do anything differently if this project was starting now?
✓ When you reflect, did you do enough preparation before the project started?