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Swedish and Indian Teams: Consensus Culture Meets Hierarchy Culture in Offshoring

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Abstract: This article describes how the employees and managers in the Swedish and Indian offices of a European-based MNC work towards new governance models in IT offshoring relations. The focus is on the differences in organizational cultures between Sweden and India and their impact on the management of and cooperation within distributed teams. Most research on IT offshoring has been conducted on US–Indian and British–Indian cooperations, where the US and British organizational cultures are more similar to the hierarchical Indian one. As a complement to the existing research, the flat and consensus-oriented Swedish organizational culture is of particular interest when studying organizational issues in IT offshoring to India.

The empirical material consists of 103 qualitative interviews with employees and managers at different levels in the Swedish and Indian offices of a European-based MNC. The results show that in addition to problems commonly faced in IT offshoring, such as resistance to offshoring and language problems (accentuated in the non-English-speaking context of Sweden), the differences in organizational cultures caused particular problems. Swedish managers were used to delegating work to subordinates who work independently towards an internalized goal, while Indian team members expected more guidance and control. As their proven management methods did not function well in the Indian context, Swedish managers needed to invent a management style that worked. The differences in the cultures also led to conflicts concerning recruitment and attrition issues. However, the Swedish company culture, where the Swedish team members viewed the Indian team members as colleagues, facilitated mutual organizational learning which led to satisfactory cooperation. This article uses the framework of Wenger (1998) to explain 1) what problems members of communities in practice in the consensus-oriented Swedish organizational culture encounter when cooperating with India, and the solutions they find and 2) what kind of prerequisites are needed for an on-site team of ‘old-timers’ to be willing to integrate offshore ‘newcomers’ for cooperative work and transfer of tacit knowledge.

Keywords: Organizational culture, organizational learning, management styles, ICT offshoring, India, Sweden

1. Introduction:

This article looks at the cooperation between Swedish and Indian teams in one multinational IT company in the light of social learning theory, more precisely Wenger’s theory of learning in communities of practice.

Swedish and Indian company cultures are vastly different. Swedish company culture is characterized by equality, qualitative assessment of performance, consensus orientation, conflict avoidance, teamwork, ‘soft’ management (which means not

giving orders but trusting the employees to act on their own sense of responsibility) and control that is more implicit than explicit. (Gustavsson, 1995; Wieland, 2011). Wieland finds 'lagom' (moderation) to be an important characteristic of the Swedish company culture. According to Wieland, 'lagom' implies that the employees take care of each other's well-being and resist managerial pressures by conforming to this cultural norm. Styhre, Börjesson and Wickenberg (2006) exemplify the special characteristics of Swedish company culture in describing the reactions of the Swedish employees in two cases where Swedish companies merged with Anglo-American ones. The main concerns of the employees were the perceived emphasis on top management control, the perceived lack of trust by management towards employees, the inequality of co-workers, the short-term financial focus and the individualist culture, which were seen as being in opposition to the collectivist Swedish organizational culture. In these circumstances the Swedish employees strived to preserve their personal responsibility, their pride in their work and their cooperative working methods.

In contrast, Indian company culture is described as hierarchical and paternalistic. Upadhaya (2009), Matthew, Ogbonna and Harris (2012) and Gertsen and Zølner (2012) all describe how the multinational companies working in India do not openly adhere to traditional hierarchical company models, but in fact work in a controlling and paternalistic way. In particular, Gertsen and Zølner describe how the company value of employee empowerment in a Danish headquarters was interpreted in the Indian office: while the Danish vision was independent employees acting on their own responsibility, in the Indian context the vision was translated into managers fostering, nurturing and empowering their employees in a clearly hierarchical relationship. Matthew, Ogbonna and Harris maintain that organizational rhetoric and even organizational values in software companies are a mixture of modern Western management techniques and traditional Indian company cultures of hierarchy, paternalism and rigidity. Upadhaya, however, takes a more critical stance and asserts that, in spite of an empowerment rhetoric and concerns for employee welfare, employees believe that "traditional Indian" organizational culture persists in the form of hierarchical structures, bureaucratic mentality and "feudal" relationships' (p. 7).

Noorderhaven and Harzing (2009) stress that a social interaction model is needed to fully explain knowledge flows between subsidiaries in a multinational corporation, and that valuable learning relationships can emerge without explicit organizational measures. The present article agrees with their assertion, and, in contrast to their statistical study, this research is based on an interview study with Swedish and Indian teams in a multinational corporation. In the present study, most mutual learning was discovered in teams which had frequent interaction.

Social learning models are not often used in research into knowledge flows in multinational enterprises (Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2009). One of the reasons might be that it is difficult to find true communities of practice which are geographically dispersed. Case studies of learning and knowledge transfer in IT offshoring relations deal predominantly with teams where cooperation is problematic (Biró & Fehér, 2005; Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007; Hirschfeld, 2004; Kotlarsky, 2008; Sahay, Nicholson & Krishna, 2003). This is often the case, for example, because of power differences between a Western client and a provider in a country which from a Western

perspective, at least until recently, has been seen as 'second' or 'third' world. Many studies deal with problems that have their origins in power differences and cultural differences—these may be national as well as organizational. The practical conclusion is often that offshoring requires a clear division of tasks which should be clearly defined and standardized and cannot be dependent on tacit knowledge (EU Foundation, 2004). In contrast, this article agrees with the observation of Sahay, Nicholson and Krishna (2003) that such standardization tends to create problems in the different local contexts and that standards do not work without extensive communication and participation. Wenger (1998) discusses the difference between reification and participation, where standards and formal documents would represent reification, while a collaboration consisting of continuous discussion would represent participation. According to Wenger, the one cannot exist without the other in the life of a community of practice.

While the results of earlier research have put an emphasis mostly on reification, the aim of this paper is to broaden the research on knowledge flows in multinational enterprises by focusing on teams which perform successful IT offshoring by relying, to different degrees, on transcontinental participation and transfer of tacit knowledge. The question to be answered is, what issues do these kinds of virtual teams face in their internal cooperation and their organizational contexts?

2. The case: Capsicom teams

Capsicom (a pseudonym) is a multinational IT company with headquarters in Europe and with thousands of employees around the globe. Capsicom entered the Swedish market by acquiring a previously Swedish-owned company, and now has several local offices. The Swedish Capsicom employees were confronted with offshoring after the acquisition. Sweden offshores almost exclusively to Capsicom's offices in India.

Four different teams were studied in depth, and interviews were conducted both with managers and with a number of employees of different levels of experience, in Sweden and in India. To get more breadth in the sample, Swedish and Indian leaders from four other teams were also included. All in all, 36 people in Swedish teams and 49 people in Indian teams were interviewed. Five locations in Sweden and two locations in India were visited. In addition, people in high administrative positions in India, in particular in HR (14 persons), and people with particular responsibilities for the offshoring relations in Sweden (4 persons) were interviewed, amounting to a total of 103 interviews at Capsicom. Three researchers were involved in the interviews: one in India, one in Sweden and one in both locations. The interviews in the teams were based on two different interview guides: one for the ordinary employees and one for team leaders. The questions were the same in both locations, though the interviews in Sweden were done in Swedish. The interviews of senior managers in India and offshoring champions in Sweden did not strictly follow a guide, but were adapted to gain relevant information from the interviewees' areas of expertise.

Frequent discussions between the researchers, two with a Swedish and one with an Indian background, provided insights into interesting issues and different perspectives already during the interviewing process. The interviews were

transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas.ti software. For this paper, a relevant selection of the codes and citations were used.

The eight teams followed different offshoring models. This paper focuses on an integrated model where the Swedish and Indian teams form a common virtual team. This model was found in different forms in Capsicom, and it seems to have its roots in the culture of the Swedish teams before the acquisition by Capsicom and the initiation of offshoring on a large scale. These geographically dispersed teams not only worked together by means of communication technology, but they also strived to do it as if they were located at the same site. An overall offshoring ideology at Capsicom was to have blended deliveries, but the virtual teams in this study learnt that this way of working was not really supported, and in some instances the Capsicom practices did not address the needs of virtual teams.

These kinds of virtual teams can be designated as 'communities of practice' according to the definition of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002): 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (p. 4). In this study, Capsicom teams, which exhibited these characteristics in spite of being geographically dispersed, are called virtual communities of practice, or virtual CoPs. The teams at Capsicom exhibited the characteristics to different degrees, and the expression 'pure virtual CoPs' is occasionally used to refer to those teams which best corresponded to the characteristics.

3. Initiation phase: Creating the community

The initiation of offshoring cooperation is crucial for its further development. The start of offshoring for most teams at Capsicom was not received favourably; a direct order came from above, causing anxiety and confusion. However, in the pure virtual CoPs, this situation had been tackled by the team members: after the initial confusion, there had been a common engagement for handling the situation as well as possible, including most, if not all, team members. The solution that was agreed on was to include the new members in India in the team as equal members:

I think the whole team was somewhat doubtful, wondering how this would end, how it would be, because we had been working so tightly together [...]. But, finally, we came up with these ideas, if we do it this way, so ... I think that first we were asking ourselves, how will we solve this, for it was never a question, how can we avoid this, but we accepted it, after the surprise, and we said, yes, but then we have to do it so it will be really good. And there was this stubbornness and engagement, and now we have to set up communications, and we have to get them here, and we have to ... it must not be some people who sit there far away and write code for us, and we don't know what we get, and maybe they don't know how, no, we must have very tight communication here.

Aspects such as good personal relationships and trust seem to have been crucial for both knowledge transfer and governance. In management recommendations, relationships and trust, even if mentioned, are often overshadowed by knowledge transfer and governance models (see, for example, Carmel & Tjia, 2005). The

governance and knowledge transfer, which satisfied both Swedish and Indian members in Capsicom virtual teams was reached mainly through personal relationships.

In the interviews, the creation of the pure virtual CoP teams was not described as something that emanated from a team leader, but something that 'we' figured out. Most of the Swedish teams in the study had been working together for a long time, and were relatively 'tight' groups. In such situations, there is a considerable risk that the group will want to continue to be the tight group and to keep the new part of the team at a distance. One explanation for the development at Capsicom can be found in the quotation above: in general, these teams had the impression that working tightly together was crucial for the quality of the product, and having people far away would jeopardize that quality. The teams adhered to the particular Swedish informal and consensus-based organizational culture and saw teamwork as the natural and only way to conduct successful work, in particular in IT development. Deciding to work in a manner that extended the team and integrated the newcomers was a solution to the problem created by the order from above to offshore.

The most successful teams had obviously been functioning well before offshoring. Setting up routines, acquiring communication technology, and inviting, educating and entertaining Indian colleagues seems in some cases to have become something of a team project. This team effort seemed sometimes to have been met with some resistance. Getting the right technical resources to facilitate tight communication was at times an initial hurdle. In those teams which managed to get permission to allow all new Indian team members to visit Sweden, both the Indians' understanding of Swedish organizational culture and the Swedes' understanding of English was greatly facilitated.

According to Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), motivation to share knowledge between offshoring partners is often affected by the onshore staff's anxiety about losing their jobs. Thus, an important condition for creating virtual CoPs was that generally the employees were not concerned about their own jobs. There were interviewees who were not happy about offshoring in general taking away jobs from Sweden, but the same person could express both negative and positive attitudes on different levels:

In general I would say that we should give people jobs here in Sweden, and not send jobs somewhere else, but I also think that we have always done this. Throughout history, and, well, it's not the next village we engage now, or the next country, but now it is a country far away, ok. I would also say that, in some way, I mean, they provide their services and they also need something to live from and this is their possibility to grow, so then it's kind of ok. [...]. In a way it's much more fun to work with them than with somebody sitting in another city in Sweden. Because you learn, it's another reality.

In the virtual CoPs, many interviewees commented on how enriching it was to work with people living in a different environment. They were not sure that the company gained anything from offshoring, but they had been personally enriched. Thus, the attitude that offshoring is good for the company but bad for the employees was turned around. There were also several interviewees who viewed the global

distribution of wealth from the Indian point of view, saying that Indians also had the right to sell their skills.

Problems can be created when two organizational cultures meet and an adaptation process is initiated. In the Capsicom teams, by the time of the interviews, cooperation had often been running for some time and different kinds of team cultures had been developed. The team cultures of the virtual teams, including both Swedish and Indian employees, were built on the Swedish team culture which had existed before offshoring and which had typically relied heavily on informal communication. For example, being present at the workplace had been encouraged by the managers and appreciated by the employees in several teams, in spite of the MNC policy to encourage homeworking. The geographical distance was a constant problem for this culture, in particular for the Swedes, who compared this experience to the previous state of affairs, where the team could interact directly at the office. The Swedish managers and team members indicated that the problem was not that part of the work was in India, but that the work was outside the office; Swedish homeworkers or team members sitting in other offices in Sweden were cited as examples of similar problems. The Swedish teams customarily adapted their schedules so that meetings were scheduled before noon, during Indian office hours, but several Swedish team members missed the possibility in the afternoons of asking a quick question or having more casual discussions with their Indian colleagues.

4. Learning from cooperation

When the Swedish employees were asked what they had learnt from the offshoring cooperation, the answers related to three aspects: being more clear and direct in communication, improving their skills in English and learning about another culture.

The general approach of the Swedish managers had been to give their Indian team members the same freedom as their Swedish team members. However, they had learnt to be more specific in their requirements, asking the Indian team members such direct questions about the progress of the work that might have been interpreted as offensive in a Swedish context. The need to be detailed and explicit with the Indian team members was described as problematic and but also as a learning experience:

You know, when you are in Sweden, there is consensus in the conference room, and you have talked for an hour and everybody gets up and somehow everybody understands what they are supposed to do. Of course that doesn't work if you are working with a group who are sitting very far away and are working in a totally different manner, so I have learnt to be much more explicit. I have learnt to order people around. To say: do this, and be very clear about it. I had never done that before offshoring came up, and it was a bit difficult in the beginning, though now I think it feels quite good. I just say, 'do this', and that's it.

The comments on language problems followed the same pattern: it had been hard in the beginning, but it was a useful and rewarding learning experience to use more English at work.

Language problems are one of the major stumbling blocks in daily offshoring cooperations, even when the client representatives are native English speakers. Cohen and El-Sawad (2007) found that the 'language barrier' encountered by the British employees in their case study for the most part did not concern language at all, however, but cultural positioning and a form of resistance to offshoring.

In Capsicom, language was seen as a problem by the Swedish employees. While the problem could be attributed partly to the resistance found by Cohen and El-Sawad (2007), real problems of understanding were also experienced by the Swedes. Although the corporate language of Capsicom was English, many of the employees worked mainly in Swedish with Swedish customers, so daily interaction in English was a problem in itself. Even those employees who felt confident about their skills in English found that the Indian pronunciation made it sometimes difficult for them to understand their new colleagues.

Some teams solved the language problem by interacting mainly through e-mail. The Indian colleagues were not entirely happy with this form of communication, but had learnt that this was the way the Swedes wanted it. However, in some teams, many people stated that they were happy to have a reason to refresh their English skills, and asserted that if one was interested enough, the language problems were manageable.

Learning about another culture was described positively from the very beginning. The employees described their satisfaction with learning to interact with different kinds of people, their interest in any news from India in the media and their experiences when they had visited their colleagues in India..

The Indian team members, when asked what they had learnt from the cooperation, mentioned issues related to working methods, in particular working with less hierarchy, planning the work with realistic estimates, and job culture.

In her review of Swedish offshoring firms, Hovlin (2006) found that the Swedish self-image emphasized such strengths as 'complex problem-solving, teamwork, management, knowledge of system operations etc.'. A number of the Swedish interviewees in the Capsicom study also stated that they had taught the Indians modern work methods.

We have made them work with modern processes of systems development, like those that have emerged after the year 2000. ... It is important that every employee puts their foot down, every employee makes time estimates. It's not the boss who says that this will take three weeks. That boss doesn't have the faintest idea, but he says something because he has to say something ... First, you have to time estimate together, and when you start developing, it's again the developer who has to say how long it will take. ... And these models lead to better products and better quality. And we have taught them to work this way. So they have moved forward almost 30 years.

This would likely have been refuted by the higher-level Indian managers, who spoke positively about the Indian processes of IT development. However, the ordinary

Indian team members seemed to partly confirm the Swedish opinions. For example, one of the Indian interviewees gave this perspective on learning what the Swedes called modern systems development:

I learnt how to plan the project, how to plan a single task. ... how to plan the things, what are the responsibilities you have. You should know completely what responsibilities you have and when work comes across, then you should plan before you start.

The non-hierarchical interaction pattern and the Swedish way of expressing criticism in a soft and sometimes concealed manner were approaches that the Indian team members appreciated from the start. They embraced the model where they could directly contact their Swedish colleagues, instead of getting only single tasks from an Indian team leader. They did not perceive any problems with the Swedish approach. However, it took some time before they understood these practices and could react to them in an appropriate way. There had been a mutual process, where the Swedes had learnt to be more explicit and detailed in their requirements and somewhat more open with their criticism, and the Indians had learnt to take greater responsibility for their work tasks and, to some extent, to discern the edge that could be concealed in the Swedes' 'soft' criticism.

5. CoPs, recruitment and attrition

The recruitment of staff was a clear source of conflict between on-site and offshore employees, with respect to power and ownership. The Swedish team leaders and Swedish employees stressed that, to find the right people, they should be allowed to take part in the selection process.

If I'm going to employ somebody or hire somebody, of course I interview them, for, I mean, one person is not like another. I need to have somebody who can speak my language and I have to know that he knows how to do what he has to do. ... But there was this attitude that if you are going to have somebody Indian, you just take one off the shelf.

The general attitude among the Indian HR managers was that on-site personnel should stipulate skill specifications and that HR would supply the team with a qualified person from the Indian job market. For Swedish on-site managers, listing detailed qualifications was not only a new exercise, but the Swedish terminology was not always understood by the Indian HR managers. This process did not work well.

In a hierarchical organizational culture, personal characteristics are not that important, as long as the work gets done, while in a virtual team, personal characteristics such as taking responsibility and being proactive, helpful and communicative are important as well as the technical skills. The fact that virtual teams consist of persons rather than competencies was often not taken into account in the recruitment and staffing practices of the Indian offices.

In the most successful CoP teams, the Swedes had been able to take part in the selection of the key members of the Indian team. However, later hiring was often left for the Indian team leader to manage, after he and his selection criteria had been

influenced by the Swedish experience. These team leaders did not always follow the standard staffing procedures of the HR department, but identified people they thought would best suit the team. In this way, the virtual team felt that the new employees were recruited according to the team's needs, and the HR department did not have to deal with direct interference from on-site.

The Indian attitude towards attrition was also a cause of conflict. Again, it was an issue of power and ownership, and this was of more concern to the Indian managers than the issue of recruitment.

Some of the managers in Sweden feel that X, Y, Z resources belong to me in India. If they do not do the work or if they leave and go then my quality suffers. My point is, you offshore some work to us. Now, whether X, Y, Z, is doing it or A, B, C is doing it, it is none of your concern. If the quality is bad talk about it, ... we will set right the quality, but don't assign it to a person saying if the person is gone, my job is not happening. That is not the right way of positioning things.

The Swedish managers of virtual CoPs viewed this matter differently. They were not simply offshoring some work to India; they had Indian subordinates with whom they had frequent contact. As a result of this attitude, they felt a responsibility for and an ownership of the team members. For them it was of foremost importance whether the work was done by X, Y, Z or by A, B, C.

However, there were also practical aspects to the problem. For example, an onsite manager could pay for a sizeable salary increase to prevent a key person from leaving the team, while the Indian office had a salary and promotion system, and diverging too much from it would be problematic for the organization. The Indian office also had a practice of encouraging rotation between teams to provide professional development opportunities for, in particular, their junior employees. This, in turn, led the Swedish team leaders to believe that the attrition rate for the company was much higher than it actually was—a low 13%, which the Indian managers proudly mentioned in the interviews.

The Indian managers asserted that the quality of the products delivered did not suffer from attrition, that they had learnt to handle attrition in relation to production and that they had back-ups and structured knowledge transfer. This was not the opinion of the Swedish managers working in virtual CoPs, where the reified and codified knowledge was only part of all the knowledge that the team used, while the rest was acquired by participation in daily interactions. Losing a person meant that another person had to be introduced by 'working alongside experts and being involved in increasingly complicated tasks' (Li et al., 2011).

Transferring tacit knowledge is impeded by staff turnover (Hirschfeld, 2004). This was not seen as an issue in the Indian offices, which viewed themselves as supplying explicit and definable competences, while it was a major problem for virtual CoPs.

6. Conclusions

As communities of practice, the Capsicom teams reflected the characteristics laid out by Wenger (1998): mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, and by Li et al. (2011): 'the support for formal and informal interaction between novices and experts, the emphasis on learning and sharing knowledge, and the investment to foster the sense of belonging among members' (p. 7). The Swedish teams can be viewed as communities of practice, where old-timers were suddenly confronted with a number of newcomers, and the Indian team members' increasing familiarity with both the work concepts and the social interaction patterns of the group was part of the normal (according to Wenger) trajectory of newcomers in a community of practice.

The Capsicom teams also seem to be a model case in the sense that there appeared to have been few power issues, and in some teams the old-timers had made explicit decisions to integrate the newcomers into the team. However, the geographical distance hampered, in particular, informal interaction and the creation of shared repertoire, not only because the distance necessarily curtailed both formal and informal interaction, but also because the contexts where the team members acted were somewhat different in the two locations, providing different frameworks in creating repertoires. Differences in organizational contexts were reflected in recruitment practices and in the Swedes' proximity to the customer (due to most customers' preference for interacting in Swedish). Differences in cultural contexts were reflected in a higher turnover in the Indian labour market and in a younger work force. Language problems disturbed the formal and informal interactions, the sharing of knowledge and the creation of a shared repertoire. However, the effects varied and the difficulties could, to a certain extent, be overcome by mutual engagement and, in particular, the Swedish investment in fostering a sense of belonging in the newcomers.

Are virtual CoPs a better way of organizing offshoring work than virtual teams which distribute work so that less overseas communication is needed? Our interviews indicate that employee satisfaction with offshoring was higher in those teams which were closer to the pure CoP model, and that more mutual learning was reported. It is reasonable to expect that these teams were healthier and probably had a more creative team spirit.

The emergence of virtual communities of practice seems to have depended on a few conditions which were present. The basic condition was an existing, at least relatively well-functioning, community of practice with a firm belief that dividing the work between two separate entities would result in inferior quality. That is, both a motivation to integrate the Swedish and Indian teams and a well-grounded ability to work in teams was required. It is probably not a coincidence that such teams existed in Capsicom Sweden, in the non-hierarchical Swedish organizational culture.

It was also important that offshoring was not regarded as a threat to one's personal employment security, or that of one's colleagues. Capsicom had made a number of layoffs during the years, but, according to a trade union representative, these were only partly due to offshoring. In the virtual CoPs, losing jobs to India was discussed in more general terms, and not as something that affected the team in question.

A third condition was that of resources. Those teams which had the opportunity to make mutual visits were generally closer to the pure CoP model. The same could be said in regard to technical communication resources.

Will virtual CoPs increase in number or will they stay as a marginal phenomenon in offshoring relationships and offshoring research? The virtual CoPs at Capsicom did mostly highly qualified work, which resists standardization and commodification better than more routine tasks. The basic condition, a well-functioning onsite team with a conviction that integrating the newcomers, rather than simply outsourcing work to them, cannot be easily created by management. It can likely only emerge in a non-hierarchical environment. It may not continue to exist even in Capsicom, after the present employee generation, many of whom have been maintaining the culture of the original local company, has retired. Thus, virtual CoPs can be expected to remain a marginal phenomenon, in particular in large MNCs. However, work in such teams is an important research area, because a community of practice is a prerequisite for transferring tacit knowledge, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for creative and efficient work in IT development teams.

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