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# The Globalization of Time: The Anatomy of the Time-Warp in International Business

6-7 Minuten

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Time is as richly complex as culture itself. For task-oriented people, such as the Swiss, time might be seen as linear - rigid, plannable, organized into blocks, systematic. For a Buddhist it is an illusion and only the present exists. For many Native Americans and Asians time is circular. In India it is conceived as being "liquid." In the West, time is money.

International business people often assume that concepts of time are the same around the globe. Take, for example, the innocuous little word, "deadline," which is arguably the most used English business term across virtually every culture. It is, in fact, one of the greatest sources of friction and failed cross-cultural cooperation. Time is a problem.

So what does a "deadline" really mean to business people around the world? The concepts differ dramatically. A German businesswoman whom we coach, for instance, assumed her Brazilian partner would automatically deliver critical data by the agreed upon deadline. Imagine her panic when she discovered - too late - that the Brazilian was stunned that the deadline was such a major issue. He had never considered

such an abstract point in time to be that important and besides it was so far in the future that it didn't even seem real to him.

This Brazilian comes from a flexible-time culture where people feel that relationships are more important than schedules, plans and structured proceedings. If a deadline is really serious, he expects business contacts to meet him personally, or call or set up some type of face-to-face via Skype or WebEx. Imagine how confused he was when his partner in Germany suddenly started to bombard him with somewhat pushy "Urgent!!!" e-mails concerning some vague deadline discussed ages ago and now somehow "missed."

His baffled reaction in turn enraged the German who felt disrespected on the personal level and desperate that her project might fail. As her deadline had been a significant one, her career could even suffer as her time-focused peers might regard her as unreliable.

Part of the confusion is that flexible-time people distinguish little between their private and professional lives, happily mixing the two. They are also very much living in the *now* and usually their *nows* are full of both business and private matters, often occupying the same priority level. But as one of the flexible-time people's strengths is multi-tasking, they expertly juggle their constantly changing priorities.

Thus, they will almost always agree with your deadline but seconds after doing so, life happens: circumstances change, new conditions come up, approaches need to be modified, and people issues arise. Their top priorities are frequently people-related. In their cultures, urgency means, "Let's meet in person and talk."

For rigid-time cultures, life is of course as unpredictable as for everybody else. But in sharp contrast, for them time is a dominate core value and they invest great energy and discipline into not letting anything interfere with their defined schedules. They do their utmost to keep their milestones and deadlines and will put themselves under pressure just to arrive to meetings punctually. To be on-time, they feel, is to show respect for their business partners and colleagues. It proves their reliability. It is both, a precondition and a guarantee of efficiency.

For time-oriented cultures, the past and the future are as relevant - sometimes even more relevant - than the present. In tune with this, they also have a strong awareness of time-frames and time-windows. In a business context, deadlines, scheduling, milestones, etc., count more than people. As private concerns usually create delays, rigid-time employees try not to let anything interfere with their well-structured processes regardless of the additional stress this places on them.

Naturally, rigid-time people also have a need for relationships, relaxation and fun. How do they manage this? By dividing their lives into two distinct spheres: one private, the other professional. They rarely mix the two.

Why is it so challenging, rigid-time people often wonder, for flexible-time- people to make their deadlines? Conflicts arise because the rigid-time person feels that one of their core values, which they see as a key to success, is “disrespected,” indeed not even acknowledged. The flexible-time person, on the other hand, thinks, “Hey - what’s more important here: your clock or our relationship? Chill out!” It is difficult for both types

to change, adept to or accept the other's perspective. But the consequences all too often damage relationships, break trust and kill business.

It is essential for both parties to realize that no-one is at fault because all concepts of time are culturally valid. In order to get their results, rigid-type individuals must learn to create strategies which target the top priorities of their flexible-time partners. For example, by increasing their focus on the multi-layered relationships needed by flexible-time business partners who regard this as an essential success factor. Equally, flexible-time individuals have to comprehend and respect the great importance and trust-building effect of punctuality and kept timelines to their rigid-time counterparts.

Subtle, unseen, deeply ingrained culturally, the tricky and treacherous global time-warp distorts our perceptions and priorities, insidiously complicating global business. Fortunately, this can be effectively mitigated through enhanced self-awareness and cross-cultural sensitivity. Thus, the maddeningly different concepts of time can be transformed from warped confusion into win-win cooperation, with the additional bonus of sowing respect and mutual understanding. Then time might indeed become meaningless. But the strongest relationships remain timeless.