

India is a leader in the offshoring business, and almost two-thirds of all Fortune 500 companies in the U.S. are already outsourcing to India. Successful outsourcing to India, however, remains a challenge, primarily due to cultural differences between the workplace values and cultural contexts of both countries. While these differences can be broadly categorized, India is as huge and diverse as the U.S. and working successfully in one area of India does not guarantee success in another. Both Americans and Indians need to understand cultural differences between the two countries in order to enhance their knowledge and skills in managing these differences. Fortunately, the corporate context brings a degree of consistency with it, irrespective of which part of India a company or its people may be from.

While there are many dimensions of culture, the area that this paper focuses on is the degree to which differences in values, daily practices, and assumptions about appropriate behavior impact workplace attitudes, expectations, and behavior. In this context, culture impacts four key variables:

- Assumptions about power
- Assumptions about time
- Assumptions about communication
- The extent to which the individual or the group is accorded the highest value

These variables, in turn, influence perceptions about authority, responsibility and accountability, sense of urgency, and notions of commitment, agreements and contracts, risk-taking, and conflict.

The following illustrates how perceptions in the U.S. and India differ:

1. *Organizational Hierarchy*

Indians tend to follow hierarchies fairly rigidly. Orders and information tend to flow from top to bottom, and very little formal communication occurs in the reverse direction. It is useful to use informal channels to pass information and news in all directions and make sure that everyone involved knows the importance of the various aspects of the projects such as deadlines, etc.

2. *Perceptions of deadlines*

Usually, Americans tend to work with clear deadlines. Indians tend to value flexibility with a client over the necessity to stick to a deadline especially during projects. In these circumstances, they may not necessarily view a deadline as imperative unless its importance has been re-emphasized.

3. *Communication Styles*

There is a complex interplay here. While there are some instances where Americans are more direct, there are others in which their styles of communication can be misinterpreted. For example, Americans tend to use certain turns of phrase in an attempt to be polite or not to seem too demanding. For example, saying to a subordinate, "It might be a good idea to add more details to this proposal" or "I think this presentation should be put together" are polite ways of communicating direct orders. However, Indians will often interpret the above statement or question as an opinion or a suggestion. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the subconscious assumptions being made about such communication and to make sure that any possible misinterpretations are avoided. On the other hand, Indians can be very direct during discussions and this can cause discomfort for some Americans.

4. *Contracts and agreements*

For Americans, it is important to document *all* requirements related to a project. The differences in perception are subtle and ubiquitous, and it is essential that two steps be followed: a) document all requirements, so that the company has the opportunity to determine exactly what they are required to do; and b) have Indian business partners reiterate their understanding of the requirements.

5. *Other communication practices*

- **Saying No**

Very often, Indians cannot say, "No" to a request, even if they do not have either the desire or the capability to meet the demands of that request. This stems partially from an unwillingness to "close a door of opportunity" and partly from an unwillingness to be viewed as unable to do something that is asked of them. It is important to probe and make sure that there is both the desire and the ability to fulfill the request, and that indeed the work *can* and *will* be done.

- **Interruptions during conversations/meetings**

Indians do not see interrupting or being interrupted as rude. If asked not to interrupt, they may interpret it as a sign that their opinions are not respected, and they may not contribute to the conversation even when their opinion is sought. It is necessary to recognize this possibility and explain, at the beginning of a meeting or a conversation, in a clear, direct, and respectful manner, that each person would like to complete his or her part of the conversation and then would very much welcome (and need) responses and ideas from the other parties to the conversation.

- **Indian speech patterns**
 - Indians tend to speak at a much more rapid pace than Americans.
 - Accents vary from light to heavy.
 - The cadence of Indian English is quite different from American English, and it takes some time to tune the ear to a different kind of "music."
 - Many words in Indian English are holdovers from the era of British colonization and may be unfamiliar to Americans who have not traveled outside the United States or encountered many people from other countries.
 - Some words in Indian English are accented on a different syllable than in American English, rendering the word (at times) unrecognizable to an American
 - Indian English is far more formal than American English and again, some phrases don't make sense to the American ear, for example at the close of an e-mail: *Please revert with changes* means *Send me back your changes, revisions, and comments.*

In regards to speech patterns, the best policy is to ask questions if you don't understand, ask the speaker to repeat what s/he said, reiterate or rephrase if you're not certain, and ask for clarification.

These guidelines will help in understanding and dealing with offshore Indian partners or vendors. There is one caveat, though as in the U.S., for everything that is true about India, the opposite is true as well. Offshoring projects between the U.S. and India can entail challenges which are often grounded in cultural differences that are not always foreseen ahead of time. Knowledge about some of these differences will help to tap into these differences as sources of strength and opportunity, allowing one to achieve successful and profitable relationships.