

Cultural Analysis Toolkit Overview

The requirements of businesspeople operating in the global business environment have evolved significantly over the past several decades. Whether they work in the U.S. or abroad, executives today are required to deal with individuals, teams, and organizational structures shaped by cultural norms different from their own. In undertaking this project, we spoke with many people who described the need for training in becoming a “new globalist”—a person who can approach a new environment analytically, assess current status and problems, determine what actions are needed and appropriate, and implement efficiently.

Traditional approaches to global business education—international business coursework and foreign language and area studies—do not fully address the current need. What is required in addition is a set of tools that facilitate assessment of a new environment, predict behavior and preferences of people in that context, and suggest methods for successful interaction. In the words of representatives of the AACSB Globalization of Management Education Task Force, students need “frameworks and paradigms that will allow them to ask the right questions as they face unfamiliar business contexts, and to think about cross-border differences in a meaningful and consistent way”¹. The Cultural Assessment Toolkit is intended as a contribution to this effort.

Scholarly work in intercultural communication has proposed numerous frameworks that account for the ways in which cultures differ. These have been used primarily to characterize the cultural tendencies of countries; however, variation within a country can be considerable, and businesspeople may need to operate effectively in a city, region or company that does not conform to the general pattern. The methodology and materials offered here adapt the cultural parameters as investigative tools for use in assessing new environments, predicting challenges the investigator will face in them and developing appropriate strategies for achieving goals.

By observing human behavior, written expression and physical aspects of a new environment, it is possible to identify the cultural features that characterize the environment and create a multi-parameter cultural profile for it. This technique can be applied to a country, region, city, company, division, work group, etc. Once the environment is understood, an investigator can predict the challenges he or she will face there, based on his/her own cultural profile, and adopt strategies for functioning successfully in the new context.

The purpose of the Cultural Assessment Toolkit is to create the links in this chain, from investigation to adaptation. It makes use of a set of cultural features adapted from work by Edward T. Hall (1959) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998). It also draws on the work of Craig Storti and Richard D. Lewis.

¹ AACSB Task Force Calls for Enhanced Globalization Strategy and Action, eNewsline, AACSB International, <http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/enewsline/globalization.asp>)

Cultural Frameworks

Scholars have proposed a number of frameworks, which correspond fairly closely to one another, that describe how culture shapes human behavior and perception. The features, in most cases, are expressed as two ends of a continuum, with each end representing a way of thinking that, while reasonable and appropriate to its own system, conflicts with that at the other end. An example is the “Universalist/Particularist” continuum that refers to people’s attitudes towards authority and rules. Universalists believe that everyone should always follow rules to ensure stability and predictability, whereas Particularists believe that exceptions to rules should be made based on situational factors (“I’m in a hurry, this rule isn’t very important, the situation has changed”, etc.). Each approach is philosophically reasonable and appropriate to the context in which the people who prefer it operate; however, when people from the poles interact, conflict can result.

The features used in the toolkit have been chosen for ease of comprehension and use in investigation, and some are modified somewhat from their original formulation for purposes of this application. Hall’s “low/High-Context” dimension is referred to as “Indirect/Direct”. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s “Short-Term/Long-Term” dimension is discussed here in terms of strategy, with Hall’s “Monochronic/Polychronic” terminology used to refer to time management and project planning.

The cultural parameters used in the toolkit are listed below:

- Achievement/Ascriptive approaches to status
- Universalist /Particularist attitudes towards authority
- Diffuse/Specific approaches to relationships
- Individualist/Collectivist approaches to responsibility and reward
- Short-Term/Long-Term orientations to strategy
- Indirect/Direct methods of communicating
- Neutral/Expressive expressions of emotion
- Monochronic/Polychronic approaches to time management

For each continuum of features, the toolkit provides the following:

1. A self-test to identify the investigator’s own preferences for the set of parameters and predict his/her attitudes towards the opposite tendencies.
2. A description of the parameters and the preferences and behaviors associated with each end of the continuum that explains how they are manifested in business.
3. Instructions for conducting an investigation to create the cultural profile of a new environment with respect to each set of cultural parameters.
4. An inventory of behaviors and attitudes that characterize people at the poles of each set of parameters.
5. A list of common reactions and interpretations of people at each end of the continuum when working with people at the opposite end.
6. Strategies for anticipating and coping with differences in preference and behavior.
7. Strategies for explaining one’s own system, ways to profit from the strengths of people at the opposite ends of the continua, and ways to frame requests and arguments in terms of the cultural priorities of people at each pole.

Cultural Profile Methodology



Process for using the Cultural Assessment Toolkit

While many cultural training seminars emphasize awareness of cultural differences, few provide detailed instructions for how to deal with those differences in business interaction. The goal of these materials is to take participants beyond intercultural awareness and offer them a basis for assessing a new environment, then anticipating, analyzing and addressing cultural behaviors encountered there. Special care has been taken to provide information about the feelings and frustrations that result from interaction between people from the ends of each continuum and suggest strategies for predicting and managing conflict while learning from and capitalizing on features of the new environment. The process is designed to make it possible for an investigator to:

- Identify his/her own culturally-based preferences and attitudes
- Assess an unfamiliar cultural environment, company or counterpart quickly and with limited exposure
- Anticipate culturally-influenced behavior and expectations of participants in negotiations and project work
- Anticipate challenges he/she will have based on the cultural assessment
- Develop strategies for successful communication and negotiations
- Resolve culturally-based conflict quickly to keep projects on track

Assessment Methodology

Self-Analysis

- Investigators take the toolkit's *Self-Test* to construct their personal cultural profile. Understanding their own cultural bias helps predict difficulty with new environments.

Review and Reflection

- Investigators become familiar with the eight cultural features by reviewing the *Cultural Behaviors and Attitudes* section. They can refer to this section to understand approaches to and expectations of business interaction that are different from their own.
- The *Reactions and Interpretations* section predicts how someone with the investigator's own profile would perceive the behavior of those with different cultural profiles and how they would be perceived by those others.
- The *Coping with Differences* section offers strategies for managing differences an investigator encounters.
- The *Learning from "Them"* section provides examples of what people in a new environment would have to offer, how an investigator might explain him/herself to them and how to frame requests and arguments in terms that would be compelling to them.

Analysis

- Investigators use the *Gathering Data* section to identify questions to ask and cultural indicators to look for as they assess a new environment.
- They refer to the *Constructing Your Analysis* section for tips on traps to avoid and ways to cross-check impressions of a new environment.
- They construct a cultural profile of the new environment based on their research.

Problem Solving

The *Coping with Differences* and *Learning from "Them"* sections offer strategies for managing conflict due to cultural differences. These sections provide recommendations for explaining an investigator's own experience and expectations to others and suggest ways to frame requests and arguments in terms that would be compelling to people at opposite ends of each of the cultural continua.