

# Intercultural Communication: Japanese and South African Work Practices

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## **Abstract**

The rapid increase in business globalisation has brought with it an increased need for effective international working environments. Cultural awareness is important to global business and, partnered with good communication, it is an essential component for ensuring the success of international business ventures. Our values, priorities, and practices are shaped by the culture in which we grow up. Understanding other cultures is crucial for intercultural communication. Therefore, intercultural communication is no longer an option, but a necessity for the survival of an organisation. Against this background, this article aims to assist international organisations and their employees, by providing guidelines for conducting business specifically in Japan and South Africa. This study further aimed to examine cultural identity of employees, intercultural barriers to business communication and communication discrimination, focussing on Toyota employees from Japan and South Africa, also known as ICT's (Inter-company transfers) and coordinators and their work practice. Existing models and theories regarding globalisation and cultural transformations in today's society are examined. The article argues that organisations could encapsulate a more intercultural and global environment and explores how advanced technology and the media are vital components of intercultural communication, used to influence communication across cultures and across geographical locations.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, international communication, non-verbal communication, globalisation, glocalisation

## **Introduction**

Alikhan and Mashelka (2009: 31) emphasise that the world is being characterised by an increasing number of contacts which results in communication between individuals and organisations with diverse cultural backgrounds. Communication is inevitable within the areas of business, military, science, education, mass media, entertainment, tourism as well as immigration. It is important to manage these contacts efficiently to minimise breakdowns and misunderstandings so that healthy interaction on a global arena is sustained; therefore, it is necessary to ensure that communication is well planned and exceptionally effective (Allwood *et al.* 2007).

Further, Gobus (2009:69-74), points out that communication is an essential component of society. It is the basic element which ensures that intentions, ideas or feelings are appropriately conveyed and perpetuated between individuals or communities. It is a functional, dynamic and transactional process whereby two or more individuals deliberately try to share meaning and promote understanding by sending and interpreting verbal and non-verbal messages. However, the way one communicates differs from person to person and from culture to culture (Du Plooy-Cilliers & Louw 2003:9).

According to Scott *et al.* (2002) people come to know themselves, form relationships and create communities through interactions with each other. When individuals from distinct groups come together, their background, experiences, culture and language all combine to facilitate the sharing of meaning and understanding through communication. This blending of cultures often contributes to skewed perceptions of individual groups; thereby limiting the ability of cultures to communicate feasibly. Sigband & Bell (1994: 78) support this concept and further affirm that there is an acute need for effective intercultural communication on a global juncture. Samovar *et al.* (1998: 3) also maintain that a symbiotic relationship ties all people together. No nation, group, or culture can remain autonomous.

The rapid increase in intercontinental business ventures has brought with it an increased need for effective international collaboration. Toyota Institute & Toyota Motor Corporation (2001: 1) add that with rapid growth, diversification and globalisation, Toyota Japan in the past decade has increased the scope of their company's manufacturing and marketing presence throughout the world, including South Africa. Hence, to be a part of

the globalised business environment, it is crucial for South Africans to gain an understanding of Japan's unique culture in order to facilitate successful business ventures. Experience with the Japanese culture provides an advantageous stepping stone with respect to the developing South African market. Nevertheless, cultural issues and complexities penetrating Japanese society provide substantial challenges for South Africa.

This article investigates intercultural communication between Japanese and South African employees at Toyota. The study is significant as it assists global organisations like Toyota in identifying pertinent issues relating to intercultural relationships and its impact on globalisation. The study aims to cultivate intercultural awareness thereby contributing positively to the global society.

## **Intercultural Business Communication**

The era of globalisation has given rise to individuals working and living with other individuals from around the world. According to Gamble & Gamble (2010: 23) glocalisation is a new concept describing the effects and mergers of globalisation with local interests and environments. All three aspects (i.e., globalisation, diversity and glocalisation) are important and affect communication. It is therefore crucial to learn about other cultures and to refrain from stereotyping them; welcoming diversity is becoming more and more important.

Chaney & Martin (2011: 2) established that intercultural business communication is a relatively new term in the business environment and is defined as communication within and between businesses that involves individuals from more than one culture. The concept of a world culture has emerged, with the increase in globalisation of the economy and the interaction of different cultures, as a social assimilation of people of varying backgrounds and nationalities; implying that individuals are losing their ethnic differences and forming one large society also known as macro-culture.

## **Language, Communication and Culture**

According to Samovar *et al.* (2007: 230) communication does not take place

in a void, hence it is not immune to external influence. The relationship between culture and communication is complex. A dialectical approach assumes that culture and communication are interrelated and reciprocal. Culture impacts on communication; all cultural groups influence the process by which the perception of reality is created and sustained and culture is also enacted through communication and therefore influenced by communication. Pearson *et al.* (2006: 61) state that culture and language are related in two ways: firstly, as the transmission of culture occurs through language. Secondly, culture creates a lens through which we perceive the world and create meaning; language thus develops in response to the needs of the culture or to the perceptions of the world.

Chaney & Martin (2011: 109) identify both the unifying and divisive nature of language. A common native language ties people together, yet the presence of many different native languages in a small geographic area can cause problems. Language determines people's cognition and perception; therefore, if they are removed from their linguist environment, they no longer have the conceptual framework to explain their ideas and opinions.

If a concept is important to a specific culture, there will be numerous terms to describe it. For example, in our (South African) culture money is very important and we have many words to depict it, for example, wealth, capital, assets, resources and finances. Similarly there are nineteen Chinese words for silk, and five words that they can use for uncle, depending whose brother he is.

The preceding study strongly suggests that there are cultural differences in the way people apply language. Each language has its own grammatical rules, and some seem peculiar to novel speakers of that language. Intercultural communication scholars use the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to explain the connection between language and culture. This hypothesis advocates that language helps us think, and that culture and language are bound together.

## **Listening and Culture**

Given our basic understanding of listening, it is understandable that listening is an essential skill for effective communicators (Pearson *et al.* 2006: 105). However, listening is difficult because of its inevitable difference that may

exist in the communication systems between the communicator and the recipient, resulting from that reality that each individual has her/his own set of experiences, and each person's communication and meaning system is unique. This is most significant in today's intercultural environment, where people from very different cultures live and work together. It is therefore, of vital importance for these individuals to understand the ways in which cultural differences can influence listening. Three of the cultural differences influencing listening are language and speech, non-verbal behaviours, and feedback (DeVito 2011: 66).

## **Non-verbal Communication and Culture**

Seiler & Beall (2008: 114) maintain that norms and rules that control the management of behaviour differ from culture to culture. However, because human beings around the world share common organic and social functions, it is not surprising to also find areas of similarity in non-verbal communication. For example, studies comparing certain facial expressions have established that certain universal expressions, such as those indicating sadness and fear, are easily understood across varying cultures. Although external behaviour is natural (for example, touching, moving, eye contact, facial expressions, interpersonal distance, smell, and silence), we as humans are not born knowing what meanings such non-verbal messages communicate. It is therefore agreed that cultures formulate rules and norms that dictate when, how, and with what situations non-verbal expressions are demonstrated.

## **Japanese Culture**

According to Samovar *et al.* (1998: 226) Japanese conduct business with an utmost sense of formality. Bowing is an integral part of Japanese society used when meeting, to show gratitude, to express sympathy or as an apology. When conducting business in Japan, Westerners would not be expected to bow (Chaney & Martin 2011: 174). However, a foreigner will most likely be greeted with a handshake combined with a slight nod of the head. The exchanging of business cards when doing business in Japan involves ritual

behaviour. The business card is seen to represent the individual, and should therefore be treated with respect. Japanese business associates also appreciate bilingual business cards. These should be printed on one side in English and the other in Japanese and the business card is presented to the other person by giving it and receiving it with both hands. It is also important to address your Japanese host by her/his last name, as only family members and close friends use their first names. It is apparent that both social and business etiquette are very unique in the Japanese culture; therefore, it is advisable to learn about the Japanese culture and customs before conducting business with the Japanese.

### ***The Importance of Building Relationships in Japanese Culture***

When doing business in Japan a successful relationship with Japanese is based on three factors: sincerity, compatibility and trustworthiness. Japanese view sincerity as compromising; understanding and wanting to conduct business on a personal level. Compatibility is established when foreigners are seen to be concerned about the personal relationship, the well-being of the company and not just focused on financial gain. Trustworthiness relates to the faith put in you to protect from loss of face (De Mente 2003: 61).

The Toyota Institute & Toyota Motor Corporation (2007: 18) explains the guiding principles set by Toyota Japan, in order to build and maintain relationships that are sincere, compatible and trustworthy. Toyota hopes to contribute to the global society through its corporate activities based on understanding and sharing of the following guiding principles:

- Honour the language and spirit of the law of every nation and undertake open and fair corporate activities to be a good corporate citizen of the world.
- Respect the culture and customs of every nation and contribute to economic and social development through corporate activities in the communities.
- Dedicate ourselves to providing clean and safe products and to enhancing the quality of life everywhere through all our activities.

- Create and develop advanced technologies and provide outstanding products and services that fulfil the needs of customers worldwide.
- Foster a corporate culture that enhances individual creativity and teamwork value, while honouring mutual trust and respect between labour and management.
- Pursue growth in harmony with the global community through innovative management.
- Work with business partners in research and creation to achieve stable, long-term growth and mutual benefits, while keeping ourselves open to new partnerships (Toyota Institute & Toyota Motor Corporation 2007: 18).

## **South African Culture**

South African traditions often arise from specific cultures, later crossing over to other cultural groups within South Africa. The general division of South African cultural groups can be traced along the lines that were polarised by the old apartheid system of governance, which divided the population into groups, namely, White, Black, Coloured and Indian. However, in April 1994, South Africa's first democratic election was held under an interim Constitution. The ANC (African National Congress) emerged as the new reigning government (Government Communication & Information Systems (GCIS 2007:1-2).

The ANC government embarked on a programme to promote the reconstruction and development of the country and its institutions. This called for simultaneous pursuit of democratisation and socio-economic change, as well as reconciliation and the building of consensus founded on the commitment to improve the lives of all South Africans. This required the integration of South Africa into a rapidly changing global environment. In pursuit of these objectives, government consistently focused during the First Decade of Freedom on seeking the unity of a previously divided society in

working together to overcome the legacy of a history of division, exclusion and neglect (GCIS 2007:41-44).

### ***The Importance of Building Relationships in South Africa***

According to World Business Culture (2010) it is important that when conducting business in South Africa, foreigners should take time to develop good relationships with the people they are doing business with. This is an important aspect in all cultures within South African society as relationships have always formed the basis of good business, regardless of cultural background. It is also important to be patient when engaging in South African contacts, as being too forceful will probably alienate people.

In general South Africans are direct communicators. Although South Africa embraces a transactional culture, meaning that they do not require a history about people in order to do business with them, they are amiable people that have deeply rooted traditions. South Africans also adopt the European approach to personal space, meaning that people keep their distance when communicating; however, personal space may also vary depending on the different cultures groups within South Africa.

## **Cultural Issues that Hinder Cooperation between South Africa and Japan**

### ***Cultural Diversity***

Steinberg (2007: 298) states that South Africa is ultimately a multifaceted nation, with many people, languages and cultures; hence, it seems to be easier for South Africans in general to accommodate and understand other cultures. However, this is not the same for Japan.

### ***Communication and Language***

The foregoing explanation affirms that the Japanese believe that by avoiding direct or explicit statements one has a better chance of not being offensive. The Japanese are implicit communicators. It is also evident that many Japanese that cannot speak English, for example, seem to be rude and do not



attempt to communicate as they do not want to humiliate themselves in an uncomfortable situation. However, South Africans on the other hand, are explicit communicators and English is the most common spoken language in South Africa. Hence, it is inevitable that the difference in the languages between both cultures will contribute to the impediment of their relationship.

### ***Non-verbal Communication***

The preceding literature study systematically indicates that non-verbal communication contributes largely to misunderstandings, if not interpreted correctly. For example, silence can be viewed as saying nothing and meaning something. Depending on different cultural values, silence is viewed differently (Davies & Ikeno 2002: 51). Hence, if the non-verbal cues are not understood in the context of the communication process, it is inevitable that the communication process will be hindered.

## **Cultural Issues that Promote Cooperation between South Africa and Japan**

### ***Values - Building Relationships***

According to World Business Culture (2010) South African cultures expect foreigners to take time in meeting and developing a good rapport with business partners. Building and maintaining relationships is important within all sectors of South African society as relationships have always formed the basis of good business, regardless of cultural background. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Hein (2011: 16) also corroborates that the Japanese also focus on building and maintaining successful relationships on a personal level with their business partners. This type of relationship is based on sincerity, compatibility and trustworthiness. The Japanese view these as essential components for a long standing relationship with their business partners.

### ***Corporate Culture***

Having a common corporate or organisational culture largely contributes to

learning and merging of both Japanese and South African cultures. For example, Toyota has seven guiding principles. These guiding principles aim at instilling values, ethics and certain methods of appropriate behaviour to their international employees. In doing so, they aim to create and maintain mutual relationships of trust and respect between all employees irrespective of their country or culture (The Toyota Institute & Toyota Motor Corporation 2007: 18).

Taking into consideration the foregoing literature, the ensuing recommendations are projected to demonstrate the most feasible way for people to communicate in an intercultural context:

- Motivation plays a crucial role in human communication, human behaviour and specifically to intercultural communication. Organisations therefore need to create opportunities for employees to engage activities that motivate individuals to want to learn more about other cultures, by creating an environment for employees to want to reach a sense of self actualisation. In order for these employees to fulfil their desire, they will encounter many cultural and societal barriers, which may impede their communication. However, they will need a willingness to persist at the attempts that meet their goals and they are required to select and sustain particular behaviours required to achieve their goal.
- The aspect of social learning is imperative in an intercultural context as it aids individuals in learning from other cultures. It provides an insight into how people in other cultures dress, act, communicate or exhibit themselves in their daily work lives. Hence, it gives employees or new members insight into how to behave in specific intercultural contexts.
- The uses and gratification theory suggests that essential human needs motivate individuals to focus on particular mass media, and to select and use media messages in ways they find personally gratifying or rewarding. Therefore, a specified medium, such as the radio, and a certain message, such as weather information, might be used by different individuals in different ways depending on their particular

needs and interests they are seeking to satisfy (Steinberg 2007: 268-269). This then can be utilised by individuals to learn more about other cultures. However, although the mass media play a critical role in influencing behaviour, as a globalised community, we are required to use this information with discretion and be open to learn from new experiences.

- For organisations to survive, and flourish in the future, their outlook must be global, and in doing so they need to equip their employees with the necessary skills required to engage in the global community.
- As suggested by Fauconnier & Turner (2002: 46-47) individuals engage in conceptual blending, where they blend their conceptual network of knowledge to experiences and new knowledge gained about other cultures.
- Global technology is yet another factor that contributes positively to intercultural communication. Organisations and employees should exploit the use of technology, and use it to their advantage to adjust their strategies in order to survive. In doing so, organisations can also change their organisational culture to suit the global environment, thereby introducing their employees to the global way of thinking and behaving.

Based on the study, the following managerial recommendations are outlined:

- It is imperative that organisations should take the necessary measures to make employees become better adjusted at working in an international environment.
- Organisations dispatching employees to work in other countries should create a network of expatriates for emotional and social support.
- Providing pre-departure training for employees and their families (increasing their daily language proficiency and knowledge of the

host country) is viewed as being valuable and an efficient means of ensuring potential success.

- The results of this study also highlight that adapting to a new culture can have both positive and negative adjustment outcomes. However, motivation and emotion plays a critical role in intercultural communication. Therefore, the answer to achieving successful intercultural communication is for individuals to engage in self-actualisation and a personal growth process. Hence individual's needs are required to change their ways of thinking, their perception of other cultures and worldviews, and become more open-minded to new and exciting cultures.
- In progressively globalised environment, it is inevitable for organisations to face the challenge of managing cultural diversity within and outside of organisation. It is therefore important for organisations to promote issues on globalisation and diversity as a core business process.
- Based on the above recommendations it is evident that in today's globalised society, it is critical for organisations to acquire, develop and retain employees who possess comprehensive globalised knowledge and experiences. These employees are the intellectual assets and fundamental resources of the organisation. It is important for the organisations to recognise this and therefore develop employees to work in a multicultural and international environment. However, this opportunity should not only be for managers, it should also be aimed at developing employees across the board.
- It is also imperative that the business and organisational culture should not only be developed around a first world country, but it should also adopt and consider ethnic cultural practices of their employees both nationally and internationally.
- Promoting and developing a third culture is important to organisations, as it generates a new understanding of other people

and cultures. The essence of a third culture mentality allows varying degrees of understanding, rather than requiring complete understanding of another's culture. A third culture recognises the diverse cultural environment and aims to develop a new context for future interaction.

## **Research Methodology**

This study constitutes both a qualitative and quantitative descriptive survey to record behaviours, experiences and relationships between and among all South African and Japanese co-ordinators within Toyota and their respective families. Questionnaires were administered to all South African (Inter Company Transfers) and Japanese co-ordinators within Toyota (from 2007). 100 representatives were chosen as a sample of which 50 were from South Africa and 50 from Japan.

A research questionnaire was administered to 42 South African and 43 Japanese employees within South Africa Toyota management echelon by means of structured personal interviews. The interview guide contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Soliciting open-ended questions in the interview was aimed at inviting participants to express their personal experiences. Seeing that open-ended questions are unstructured, the aim of these types of questions was to elicit underlying ideas, feelings, sentiments and suggestions that researchers may not have considered.

The study was perceived to be important in bridging the gaps identified in intercultural communication and providing guidelines for multinational organisations with regards to building and maintaining intercultural relationships, thereby contributing positively to the global society.

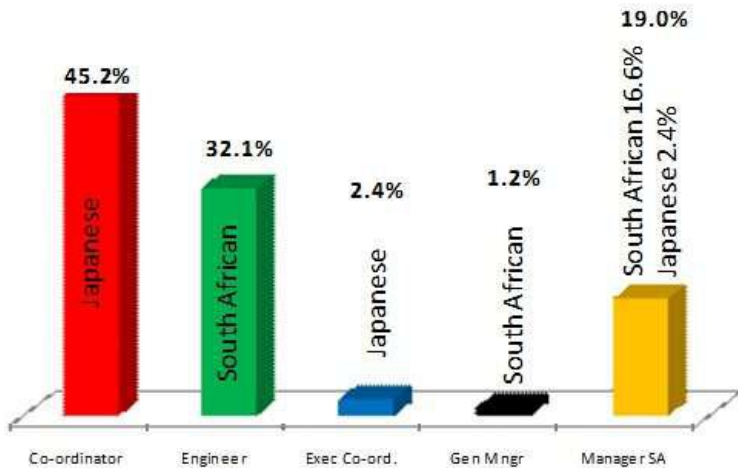
## **Results and Discussions**

This section illustrates close-ended questions using tables and graphs. The results of the open-ended questions were coded and analysed using content analysis. Distinct categories were divided into significant groups into which units of analysis could be placed. The findings of the study were then

compared to the literature review to determine the importance of intercultural communication, the possible barriers to intercultural communication and the possible solutions that could be implemented to combat these barriers.

### ***Biographical Data of Respondents***

A question about biographical data provides general biographical characteristics of the respondents that participated in the study. The study comprised respondents from South Africa (respondents that worked in Durban, a city in KwaZulu-Natal) and Japan (respondents from SA who worked in Nagoya – a city in Japan).

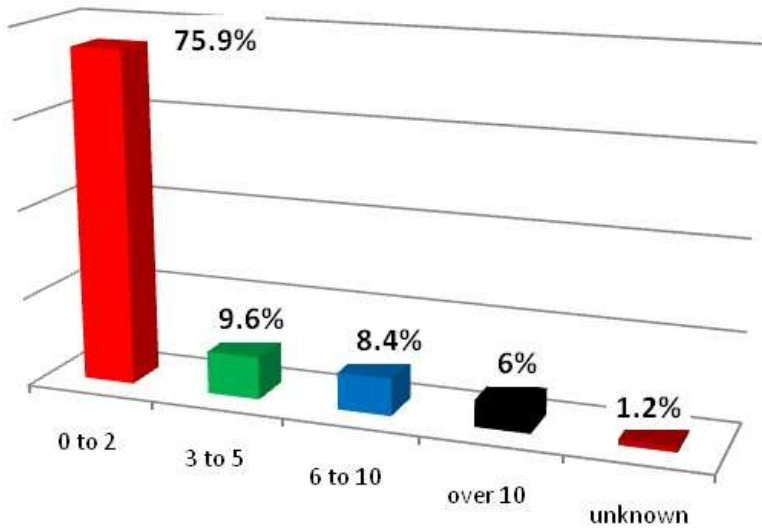


**Figure 1: Designation of respondents**

Approximately forty five percent (45.2%) of the respondents were Japanese co-ordinators. The second most common job designations were South African Engineers (32.1%). The Managers (19%) were a mixture of South African and Japanese nationals.

**International Work Experience**

Most of the respondents (almost 76%) had less than two years international work experience. Six percent of the respondents had more than ten years work experience.

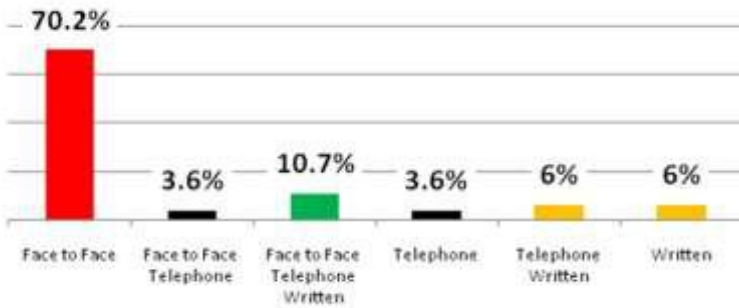


**Figure 2: International work experience**

However, Figure 2 indicates that there are an increasing number of individuals that are being exposed to international working environments. Figure 2 further substantiates the view of O’ Shaughnessy & Stadler (2006: 436) who view globalisation as a sense of interconnectedness which is offered by facilitating interpersonal communication and the formation of communities and relationships across geographical, racial, religious and cultural barriers. South Africa and Japan are both increasingly contributing to the concept of globalisation. In support of the increase in globalisation, Sigband and Bell (1994: 78) affirm that there has never been a more acute need for effective intercultural communication worldwide than at present.

### ***The Main Means of Communication with Other Nationalities***

While all forms of communication are pursued (for example: emails and telephone interaction), the majority of the respondents indicated that face-to-face communication is the most common method of communication employed when communicating with workers from other cultures (in this case Japanese and South Africans). Face-to-face communication included video conferencing when communicating cross continents.



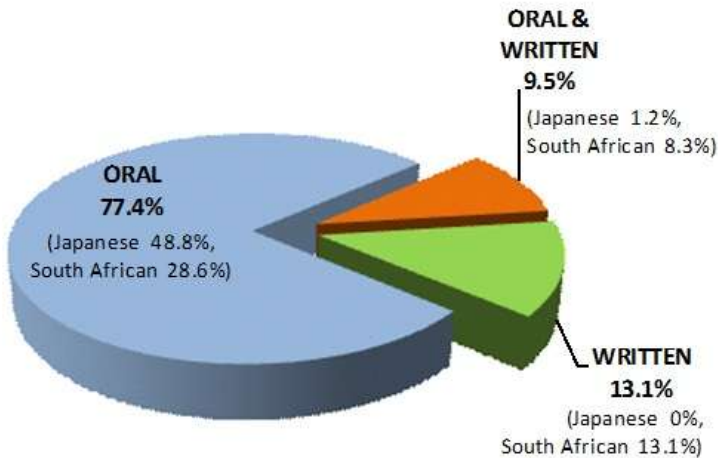
**Figure 3: The main means of communication with other nationalities**

Gamble & Gamble (2010: 36-37) affirm that technology pervades national precincts and erodes the association between location and experience. It enables individuals to interact more easily with others who have different worldviews than they do.

### ***Preferred Type of Communication when Communicating with other Nationalities***

Respondents also indicated their preferred type of communication which they felt was most profitable in an intercultural environment. The majority indicated that oral communication is the most profitable type of communication.



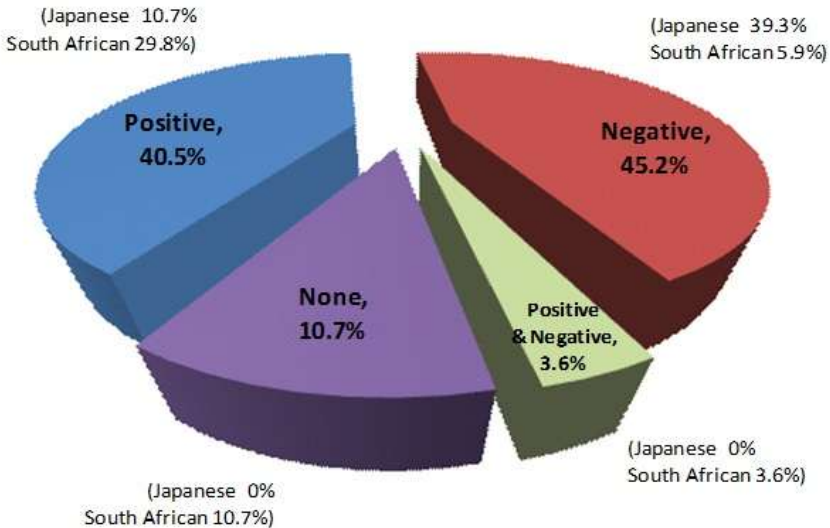


**Figure 4: Preferred type of communication**

### ***The Positives and Negatives of the Major Cultural Adjustments Experienced***

Majority of the respondents (42.3%) indicated that ‘language’ was the major cultural adjustment experienced while abroad. Almost twenty five percent of the respondents, who were all South Africans, indicated that a safe environment in Japan (which was welcomed) was another cultural adjustment experienced.

Figure 5 indicates the percentage of respondents who found their cultural adjustments positive or negative. A notable number of respondents (45.2%) experienced negative feelings towards cultural adjustment.

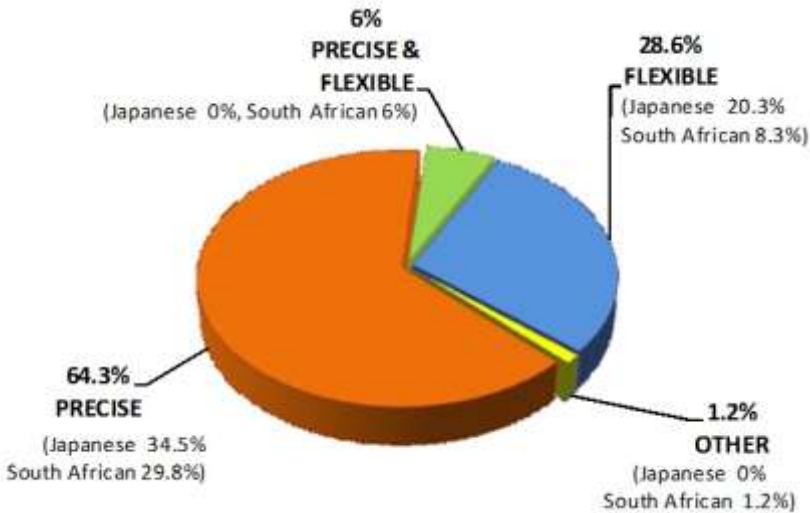


**Figure 5: The positive and negatives of the major cultural adjustments experienced**

### ***Timekeeping***

Froemling *et al.* (2011: 101) deemed 'timekeeping' to be a critical component of non-verbal communication. Alberts *et al.* (2007:147) also add that people often interpret others' use of time as conveying a message, which eliminates it from the behaviour sphere and assigns it to an area of communication.

According to Jandt (2010: 118) the concept of time varies from culture to culture. When people come together from different cultures and value time differently, it is expected to lead to conflict and a sense of displacement. However, this investigation comprehensively affirms that the concept of time is evidently important to both Japanese and South African cultures.



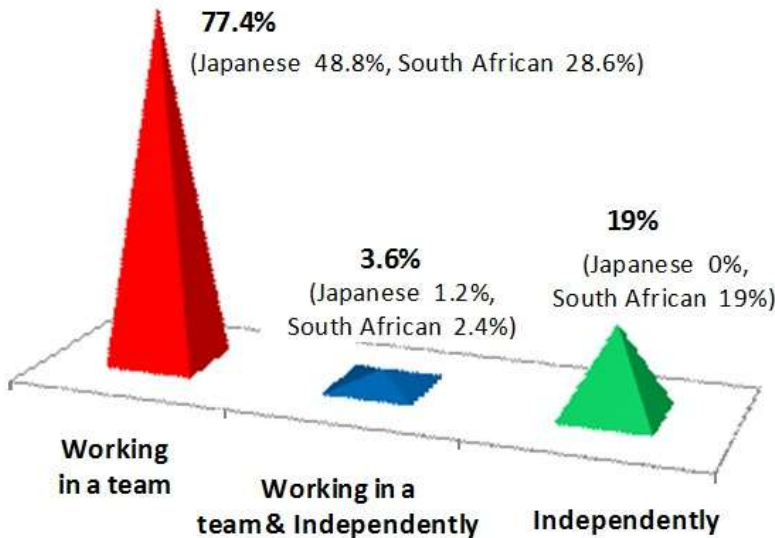
**Figure 6: Timekeeping**

Figure 6 confirms that the majority, 54 (64%), of the respondents indicated that precise time keeping is important, while 28.6% (24) pointed out that flexible time-keeping is important, and 6% (5) indicated that depending on the situation, both flexible and precise time keeping is important.

***Preferred Method of Working***

Gamble and Gamble (2010: 267) declare that collectivists use group norms rather than individual goals to guide their participation, hence they are likely to be team players, and emphasise harmony and cooperation. For example, team-work, selflessness, and group cohesiveness are all areas greatly stressed within Japanese society. However, Alberts *et al.* (2007: 179) affirm that not all Japanese are collectivists. In effect, generational differences may exist within cultures where collectivism is strong. For example Japanese college students show a strong preference for individualism while their parents hold a more collectivist perspective which can lead to miscommunication and conflict.

The results in Figure 7 highlight that 77.4% (65) of the respondents preferred working in a team, while 19% (16) preferred working independently. Irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, both South African and Japanese cultures find it important to work together.

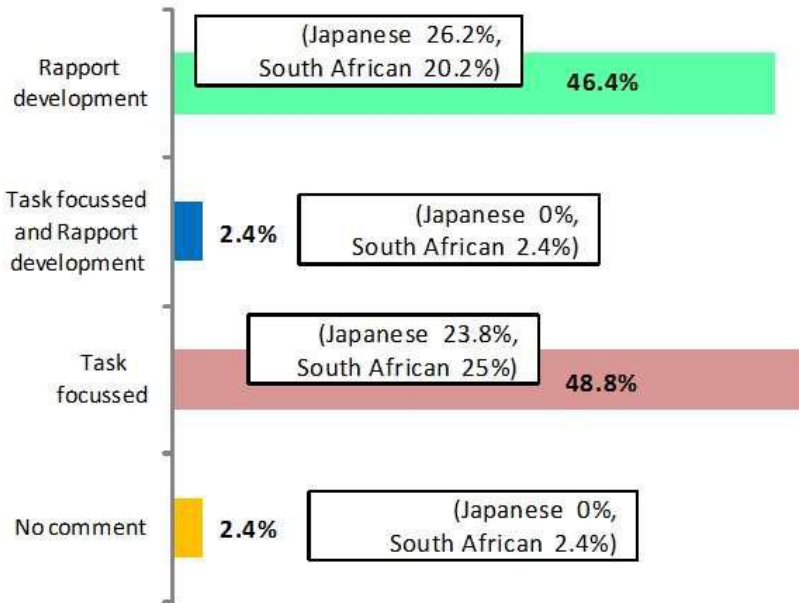


**Figure 7: Most preferred method of working**

### ***Cultural Ways of Dealing with Business***

Figure 8 indicates that 48.8% (41) of the respondents indicated that their culture focussed more on tasks. On the other hand, 46.4% (39) demonstrated that their focus was on developing a rapport with their business partners.

The majority (51.2%) of the Japanese respondents indicated that their cultural priority is to develop relationships with their business partners, while the majority (56.4%) of the South Africans revealed that their culture prefers being task focussed and getting down to business. However, the South Africans also indicated that this depended on the nature of their job.



**Figure 8: Cultural ways of dealing with business**

South African respondents also indicated that there were situations where developing a rapport with business partners was seen as being most important.

De Mente (2012: 186) affirms that when conducting business in Japan a successful relationship with Japanese is based on sincerity, compatibility and trustworthiness. In fulfilling these factors, the Japanese aim at establishing and sustaining venerable relationships. The World Business Culture (2010) also confirms that it is also important when conducting business in South Africa, for foreigners to take time to develop good relationships with the people they are doing business with. This is a vital aspect in all cultures within South African society as relationships have always formed the basis of good business, regardless of the cultural background.

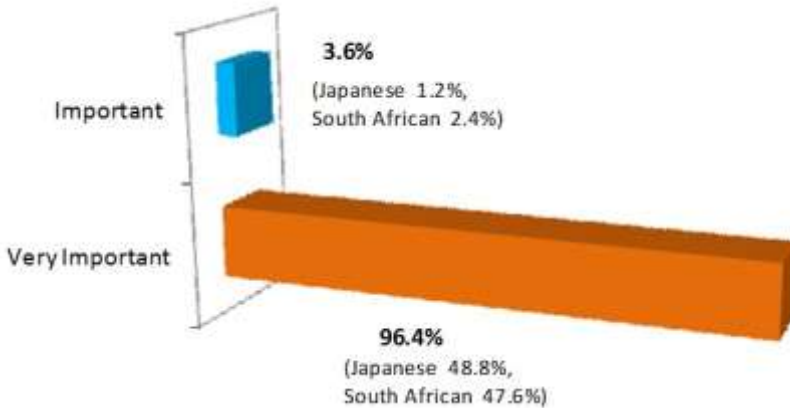
The Toyota Company also identifies the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the various stakeholders. The significance of building and maintaining relationships is evident in Toyota's organisational culture by which Toyota aims to contribute positively to the global society. Respondents were also asked to explain why they conduct business in this way. The majority of the respondents, 41 (48.8%), indicated that although they are task focused, it is not always the most preferred way of conducting business. Conversely, due to the nature of their job, being task focused is preferred when doing technical work, as the nature of the business demands immediate action with limited time frames; hence, it seems to be the most effective way to resolve technical issues. It is also evident that when working with targets that are set higher than competitors it is important to be task focused and to be ahead.

However, the 46.4% (39) of the respondents indicated that building and developing a rapport is of utmost importance. It is also Japanese culture to know business partners. Developing relationships is of utmost importance especially when working at a global level, as people are organisations most valuable assets. It was also stipulated that Toyota's core business is to build relationships with both employers and suppliers and good business relationships are required to achieve common organisational goals.

Verderber & Verderber (2008: 116) strongly affirm that competent intercultural communicators overcome cultural barriers by adopting the correct attitudes towards other cultures, increase motivation, acquire accurate information about other cultures' values and practices, and develop specific skills required to be effective across cultures.

Alberts *et al.* (2007: 147) also affirm that people often interpret others' use of time as conveying a message, which eliminates it from the behaviour sphere and consigns it to an area of communication. For example, if a business colleague consistently arrives more than an hour late for a meeting, how is her/his behaviour interpreted? Culture strongly influences how most people answer that question (Alberts *et al.* 2007: 147). The analysis highlights that in both South African and Japanese cultures, time is considered highly important, and the expression 'time is money' is often used to express the value of time. It can then be concluded that in countries like South Africa and Japan, lateness can communicate insensitivity,

irresponsibility, or selfishness. However, not all cultures value time similarly.



**Figure 9: Interaction with international partners**

The areas of business communication that are deemed vital in business communication include leadership styles, frequent meetings and discussions and oral and written communication with all business partners.

## **Conclusion**

Many parts of the world are becoming similar because of the prevalence of media that exposes people to elements of different cultures. However, it is also evident that misunderstandings can still occur when individuals lack understanding of real differences in perception and meaning of messages. There were also other intercultural communication problems that were experienced by expatriates that related to:

- Time management;
- Language deficiency;

- Work culture;, and
- Food and security.

This study revealed that there were more differences than similarities in the area of time management, language deficiency, working culture, food and security in South Africa and Japan. These problems led to inability to express what each individual really wanted from another to achieve either her/his organisational or individual goals. However, Beebe *et al.* (2011: 102-103) explain that the reason to understand that humans have similarities and differences is not to diminish the function of culture as a vital element that influences communication, but to understand that despite cultural differences, we are all members to the human family. When engaging in intercultural communication, it is important for individuals to take time to explore the other person's background and cultural values before one can determine their cultural similarities and differences.

Culture plays a pivotal role in the development of human thoughts and behaviours. Disregarding other cultures in an intercultural environment can probably jeopardise the communication process. For example, gift giving is an important component in the Japanese culture; hence, if a wrong gift is given it can jeopardise potential intercultural relationships. This study accentuates the rich and complex process of communication that involves multiple messages sent via several channels. However, culture has an invasive influence on the encoding and decoding of these messages, which can impede intercultural communication. Beebe *et al.* (2011: 98) also confirm that misunderstanding and miscommunication can occur between people from different cultures because of different coding rules and cultural norms, which are instrumental in shaping patterns of interaction.

There is an increasing connectedness of the world in financial, political and cultural spheres, as well as workforce mobilisation. Hence, this study stresses the importance of cultivating intercultural awareness, as it is vital for individuals to improve their intercultural competence to cope with the demands of globalisation.

Feelings of stress and apprehension people experience when encountering another culture is referred to as culture shock. Chaney & Martin (2011:82) add that aspects of cultural shock include cultural stress, social alienation, social class and poverty/wealth extremes, financial matters,



and relationships and family considerations. Losing familiar signs, customs, norms and behaviours can be very disturbing and contribute greatly to culture shock which also impacts intercultural relationships. Therefore, if a person is visiting or living in a new culture, their uncertainty and stress may take time to subside as they learn the values and codes that characterise the other culture.

The study also revealed that language problems were seen as a major contributing factor that impeded intercultural relationships. The study highlighted that basic ‘everyday’ communication language was required to initiate and follow informal conversations in interactions with the other culture, however, a lack of vocabulary, and more specifically, lack of knowledge of words outside the ‘motor industry’ meant that both cultures experienced problems talking about issues that were not directly related to the work at hand. This was unfavourable, as small talk is essential for building and developing relationships. According to World Business Culture (2010) it is important that when conducting business in South Africa, foreigners should take time to develop good relationships with the people they are doing business with. Building and maintaining relationships is also a vital attribute in Japanese culture. Hence, respondents indicated that there is no need for language training to focus too heavily on the technical and grammatical aspects; instead it should focus on vocabulary that can be used in daily communication.

Furthermore, non-verbal cues, like facial expressions and even drawings and graphics play a vital role when engaging in an intercultural environment, specifically in this study. As a result of the company being a motor industry, the core responsibilities of the employers were most often than not, technical. Hence, despite the various communication barriers that employers from the different cultures experienced, it was clear that non-verbal and face-to-face communication was viewed as being most profitable, as individuals were able to use drawings and facial expressions to enhance their verbal messages.

It was also evident that technology, particularly the Internet is responsible for educating people about other cultures. Therefore, companies could be exploring this avenue as a means of learning and educating their staff.

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