

Panel: What would you do ...? Multicultural IS cases

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I. DESCRIPTION

In this session, the panel members will be confronted with two practical cases of problem situations in global software development projects. They will be asked to advise the protagonists of the cases, and to indicate if, and if so how, they have made use of the concept of culture in their advice. The panelists are people who are familiar with cross-cultural issues at many levels, through research work and experience. They receive the cases in advance. The aim of the session is to experience how culture can or cannot be used in IS practice, and to investigate what this implies for IS research.

The concept of culture is widely used in the field of IS research in the network era, and the word “culture” crops up in titles of publications, panels, and conferences. But what does it mean? And how useful is it? Is it a chimaera that we IS researchers could do without?

This panel assembles persons who have been working with the concept of culture in the domain of Information Systems. The panel will explore what meanings have been assigned to the concept of culture and how important these meanings are for IS researchers. The aim is not to establish what culture “is” in an absolute sense, but to investigate how the IS community can best use it.

The panel starts with a working definition of culture as *that which distinguishes one group of people from another*. “That which distinguishes” might be values, symbols, rituals or heroes, or any kind of practice. “One group” might be an ethnic group, a nation, the members of an organization, those of a profession, a social class, or any other group, e.g. Web users.

Two (unpublished) cases of actual and current events in multi-culture settings will be briefly introduced by the panel chair and interpreted by the panelists. Here are abbreviated versions of the cases.

Semiconductor trouble

The first case was recorded by Rebecca Dooley. It is about a misunderstanding arising in the production of semiconductors between the design site (USA) and the production site (Singapore). Production is being delayed by software problems, and both parties propose a solution. Which should be adopted, and who decides? The Singaporean manager refused to go along with the US manager’s proposal. How should the US manager respond?

Global deadline missing

The second case was recorded by Erran Carmel. It is about a dispersed project of embedded software development. The hub of this development project is in Israel, at a leading technology company, with 2 small additional specialized units, each with approximately 5 software engineers. One of the specialized units is in the US (an alliance) and the other is in India (these are contractors). The indispensable, highly expert Indians are late. What should the project manager do?

The panelists will adopt different angles of interpretation, in order to find out how this affects their perception of the situation. Following the interpretations, the panel chair will attempt a meta-analysis of the panelists’ readings of the cases.

II. PANEL MEMBERS

Chrisanthi Avgerou, London School of Economics - North versus South Europe

Robert Davison, City University of Hong Kong - Europe versus South-East Asia

Roberto Evaristo, University of Denver - cross-cultural research issues

Margaret Tan, National University of Singapore - South-East Asia versus Anglo countries

Rita Walczuch, University of Maastricht – research method