EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF NATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND RECOGNITION STRUCTURES IN A MULTINATIONAL ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

This study examines how well organizational culture functions as a mechanism to support diversity and respect for employees’ national culture in a multinational organization. Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions and Ting-Toomey’s face negotiation theory provide a framework for understanding the needs and expectations of individual employees regarding performance evaluation and recognition from leaders for culture-specific skill sets. The study was conducted at a multinational call center located in Ireland, where employees negotiate the collection of negative balances for online payment accounts belonging to customers in the EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa) and APAC (Asia Pacific) regions of the world. The employees represent approximately 20 different nationalities. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted to obtain first-hand accounts of employee and leader experiences, which were further supported by a quantitative survey. Analysis of the study results clearly reveals that employees’ culture-specific skill sets are critical to a multinational organization’s ability to succeed in its chosen market(s). The results also demonstrate the effectiveness of a strong organizational culture in creating an environment where diversity is acknowledged and respected, allowing employees to feel comfortable bringing their national cultures to the workplace in support of the organization’s mission. Most importantly, the study makes an argument for increased sensitivity on the part of the organization and its leaders to the role that national culture plays in employee expectations regarding performance evaluation and recognition, to ensure the ongoing health of the organization and satisfaction of its employees.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Multinational organizations are becoming more commonplace, as businesses strive to compete in a global economy and gain advantages against competitors by opening satellite offices in other countries. The multinational characteristic of an organization may originate from two places: from an organization seeking to expand the diversity of its workforce and international consumer base and from the many different nationalities, languages, and cultures of the organization’s employees (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon, & Dannels, 2002, p. 294; Lewis, French, & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 107-108).

This exploratory study focuses on a multinational organization based in the United States with a call center operation located in Ireland. The call center is responsible for collecting negative balances for customers’ online payment accounts. The broader organization serves customers around the world, and its offices in Ireland focus on customers in the EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa) and APAC (Asia Pacific) regions. The call center employs over 100 people, who represent approximately 20 different nationalities and speak more than 8 different languages.

Diversity can take many obvious forms, including gender, aspects of physical appearance and differences in spoken language; however, a more hidden form of diversity is culture. Culture affects an individual’s perceptions, interactions with others, responses to situations, and provides an overall system for making sense of and sharing information (Hall & Hall, 1990, pp. 136, 179). When people from many different cultural backgrounds come together in an organizational setting, such as the call center chosen for this study, the influences of their national culture membership are present in everyday interactions between employees and with customers. In this multinational organization and others like it, people from many different
cultures are required to work together to further the goals of the organization, to share the
organization’s values, and to be part of the organization’s culture (Pinzaru & Galalae, 2009, p. 241). The success of a multinational organization relies on effective interaction between many
employees with highly diverse backgrounds. The organization must effectively communicate
with all levels of employees in order to understand how well the diversity is being acknowledged
and whether or not employees feel they are being adequately recognized and treated equally.
The organization must also engage and recognize its many diverse employees effectively,
ensuring that it promotes a culture where employees respect each other’s unique cultural
background, beliefs and values and also feel valued and respected by the organization.

**Importance of the Study**

In a multinational organization communication effectiveness is largely dependent on
cultural awareness, which adds a layer of complexity that can contribute to conflict or
communication difficulties (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 294; Lauring, 2007, p. 5). Ultimately, what
communicators in this particular multinational organization (and any other for that matter) are
dealing with is intercultural communication. In order to be successful in intercultural
communication, each employee in the call center and the broader organization needs to have an
understanding of basic communication skills as well as the different national cultures of fellow
employees that drive expectations, perceptions or reactions. If the call center employees are not
recognizing the cultural differences between themselves and their coworkers and learning how to
effectively navigate those differences, the potential for misunderstandings and conflict is high.

Multinational organizations, such as the one chosen for this study, place a high value on
diversity in the workplace, because they recognize that diversity is valuable to their ability to
innovate and outthink the competition (Lauring, 2007, p. 5). However, organizations that claim
to celebrate their culturally diverse teams often overlook the necessary step of conducting routine, in-depth assessments to determine whether or not employees truly feel their diversity is acknowledged and respected, or if they feel pressured to align themselves more closely with the organizational culture. Multinational organizations in particular need to conduct these assessments, to understand if and how the organizational culture is at odds with the diverse cultural beliefs of employees and to more effectively manage their employees. The organization selected for this study conducts an annual survey to assess employee satisfaction. However, it has not previously conducted any in-depth studies to determine whether or not the rapidly expanding cultural diversity of the teams in Ireland presents any challenges in managing employee performance and recognition.

If the diverse group of employees working in this call center is being managed effectively, trust will exist between employees and the organization, morale will be steadily high, and employees will generate innovative ideas that benefit the company (Polat, 2012, pp. 1409-1410). If the cultural differences are not being managed effectively, they will become a disadvantage to the organization (Polat, 2012, p. 1409). Creating an organizational culture that demonstrates commitment to equitable treatment of employees requires not just tolerance of diversity but celebration of it (Lewis, French, & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 115-116). The question then becomes, “How do we celebrate diversity, but at the same time retain a sense of being part of a larger community and reaffirming our common humanity?” (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 70).

**Statement of the Problem**

The supervisors within the collections call center are expected to universally implement organizational policies across a widely diverse set of employees. To date, the supervisors have not received any formal education from the organization to help them effectively manage the
cultural diversity of their subordinates. Employees are responsible for collecting payments in multiple different markets, which requires a specialized set of culture-specific skills beyond their world language capabilities. Despite the differences involved in collecting in culturally diverse markets, performance for collectors is evaluated using a single set of performance standards. This leads to a perception among employees from particular national backgrounds that they are not being adequately recognized for their performance because the scoring system is flawed.

To further complicate the issue, employee performance is shared at a department level, when scores are communicated bimonthly via email to incent increased performance. The majority of the discussion between subordinates and supervisors occurs in group meetings with all members of each team present, and there is limited opportunity for one-on-one interaction between employees and supervisors. The open discussion of performance and the use of competition to incent employees are typical American philosophies that may not translate well in the European call center environment. Whether or not employees have any prior experience interacting with different cultures or have developed any level of intercultural communication competence, they are expected to interact with coworkers from other cultures with minimal dissonance or conflict, according to the organization’s cultural environment that espouses respect for the diversity of all employees.

In an effort to determine how well this organization balances its organizational culture with the many different national cultures of its employees, this study sought to understand the cultural preferences and expectations of the organizations’ employees regarding aspects of job satisfaction, such as performance evaluation and recognition (Lewis, French, & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 115-116). Does the organization truly demonstrate respect for diversity and balance the needs of its employees with those of the business?
**Definition of Terms Used**

*Multinational organization* – an organization comprised of employees representing many different nationalities, languages and cultures, where the employees typically interact with customers representing a similarly diverse set of characteristics.

*Culture* - a “system of collectively held values” or mental programming that separates members of one group from another (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 24)

*Organizational culture* - determines what members of the organization need to know in order to function as part of the organization and provides a structural framework that shapes how information is shared by leaders and amongst employees (Deetz, 1982, p. 133).

*Intercultural communication* - an exchange of messages between people from different cultures (McDaniel, Samovar and Porter, 2009, p. 7).

*Intercultural communication competence* - the ability to communicate across cultures in a manner that effectively accomplishes one’s objectives but also appropriately acknowledges the cultural context of the situation (Spitzberg, 2009, p. 381).

*Culture dimensions* – a framework for understanding the behaviors, values, and beliefs of individuals belonging to a specific culture. Dimensions provide context by illustrating a culture’s orientation toward certain beliefs. For example a tendency toward individualism or collectivism, use of high or low power distance, desire to avoid uncertainty, definition of appropriate roles for men and women, and other key values and beliefs (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 16; Hofstede, 1983, pp. 46, 64).

*Face* - a person’s self-image, “a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him” (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 187).
Facework - the process through which people use a variety of communicative acts such as use of language and other verbal or non-verbal messages to negotiate face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 190-191).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter two provides an overview of the philosophical and ethical assumptions influencing the study and identifies the theoretical framework for the study. It also provides an overview of relevant literature and the rationale that led to the development of the study’s four research questions. Chapter three discusses the scope and methodology for the study, which utilized qualitative focus groups and individual interviews in addition to a quantitative survey to answer the proposed questions. In chapter four, the results of the study are analyzed and the implications of the findings are discussed. The findings highlight the cultural differences present in collecting in different customer markets, drawbacks to the existing performance evaluation system used by the organization, and challenges that arise as a result of the organization’s approach to managing a highly diverse team of collectors. Finally, chapter five summarizes the results and conclusions drawn from the study and presents opportunities and recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2: Review of the literature

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

Communication provides a means for individuals to express their values, beliefs, and emotions for many different purposes, such as defending a point of view, establishing social connections and relationships with others, or seeking validation of one’s existence. People often do not realize the influence that culture has not only on what they communicate but also how they communicate. Culture both influences communication and is constructed through communication (Lauring, 2011, pp. 234, 236; Miller, 2006, p. 36). It determines the actions of communicators and in turn is further defined by those actions as individuals are presented with opportunities to change their own culture construction by understanding someone else’s (Lauring, 2011, pp. 234, 236; Miller, 2006, p. 36).

Condit (2006) defines communication itself as relational, fluid and influential, whereby participants are forging dynamic relationships through the process of communicating and the resulting relationship influences or changes the participants (pp. 3-4). Interpersonal relationships are typically defined by the degree of similarity or difference between the people involved (Condit, 2006, p. 6). Communication must be viewed as dialogue; a means for constructing identity and sharing it with others, gaining an understanding of others in order to construct relationships, and creating meaning together by sharing and discussing different points of view, rather than a simple mechanism to uncover similarities or differences between self and others (Baxter, 2006, p. 105). In the spirit of relationship and dialogue, communication should never seek to eradicate the difference between self and others by enforcing a particular set of beliefs that not everyone shares or is willing to adopt, regardless of the setting in which the communication occurs.
Buber’s dialogic ethics provide a framework for how individuals should treat each other when engaged in dialogue. His philosophy is founded in the *categorical imperative* of Kantian ethics, the idea that all humans are bound by a sense of unconditional duty, that there are certain things people should and should not do (Wall, 2008, p. 38). A critical component of the categorical imperative is the belief that people must never treat each other as a means to an end or an object to be manipulated (what Buber refers to as the *I-It* relationship), but must instead recognize each other’s inherent worth as individuals and see each other as themselves (Buber’s *I-Thou* relationship) (Wall, 2008, pp. 39-40; Buber, 1958). The morally and ethically correct *I-Thou* relationship can only be created through dialogue. Dialogue is synonymous with ethical communication, in that it forms the connection or relationship between people that allows them to help each other become more human, through self-disclosure, vulnerability, and affirmation of the other (Buber, 1958).

In an organizational setting, leaders may be tempted to forgo dialogue in favor of a directive style of communication in an effort to inform employees of the organization’s purpose, define company goals, or identify what success looks like for each individual and team within the company. The complexities presented by the culturally diverse workforce in a multinational organization can add to the temptation supervisors feel to be more directive in their communication style. Intercultural communication challenges can stem from the most fundamental aspect of language to the more nuanced issues of emotions and power dynamics that occur in conversations between leaders and subordinates. These challenges can cause leaders to believe that homogenizing difference by creating a shared vision or language will make communication easier. Organizations must decide whether they will take an approach of valuing the diversity or utilizing it as a means to an end. Valuing diversity involves mutual
accommodation and adaptation and utilizing the diversity involves seeing it as a resource to be exploited (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 107). Despite the inherent challenges in managing culturally diverse teams, leaders have a moral obligation to know each person on their team, understand what each person’s specific needs and skills are, and figure out what they must do to contribute to each person’s success (Cox, 1994). Employees also bear a responsibility to communicate with each other effectively in order to share knowledge and resolve conflicts, to support each other, and to work alongside each other in a manner that demonstrates respect for each individual’s national culture (Roper, 2011, p. 77).

The organization chosen for the study provides an environment that is ideal for exploration of the effectiveness of dialogue in managing cultural differences and creating ethical relationships between employees, because of the highly diverse makeup of the staff. Each employee in the organization communicates his or her identity and national culture to others everyday (Lauring, 2011, pp. 234, 236; Miller, 2006, p. 36). Within such a diverse organization, the likelihood is high that cultural differences will exist. The study will seek to understand whether or not intercultural communication dissonance occurs in employee interactions as a result of cultural differences and how well employees use dialogue not only to communicate their own identity but to understand others. Specifically, discussions of performance evaluation and recognition will be evaluated to determine what impact any identifiable dissonance is having on the creation of I-Thou versus I-It relationships between employees and supervisors. Since the organization places a high value on respect for diversity and national culture, it is important to understand whether or not individuals feel respected in terms of their diversity. The theory and literature that follows will provide a framework for understanding the specific influences of culture on the employees in the organization, how each employee’s culture and level of
intercultural communication competence can influence their interactions, and how the organization might successfully navigate the cultural differences.

Theoretical Basis

**Hofstede’s Theory of Cultural Dimensions**

Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions provides a framework for understanding the complex nature of communication that occurs between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in multinational organizations. Hofstede makes an important distinction between values and culture, defining values as “a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (1980a, p. 19). Culture, on the other hand, is what influences a person’s response to the world around him (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 24). Culture is typically a word used to describe people that share ethnic or national roots, but it can also be applied to families, people who share a similar profession (firefighters for example), and to organizations (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 24).

Hofstede explains that cultural differences in perspective are based on whether or not a person comes from an individualistic or collectivistic culture, providing a framework to help researchers understand how people may differ in their personal and professional motivations, values and beliefs (Hofstede, 1983, p. 46). A culture’s orientation toward individualism or collectivism affects numerous norms and beliefs, from the definition of the family unit, to its educational, political, and religious institutions (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 214-215). In the case of the individualism versus collectivism dimension, one’s culturally informed sense of self is a key factor in determining which side of the dimension a person will land on (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 215). This dimension is particularly important because it dictates how a person will act in comparison to the collective and therefore carries moral undertones and consequences (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 215). Hofstede created a scoring model using frequency distribution, measures of
central tendency and occupational controls to analyze answers to a questionnaire consisting primarily of a series of questions with five-point answer scales (1980b, pp. 69-74). The scores were compiled for each country included in the study as a means of establishing comparisons and a spectrum of high to low values for each of the cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 69-74).

Individualism is generally perceived as a Western cultural norm, and may be viewed critically as selfish or alienating or positively associated with freedom of thought and expression (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 213, 216, 235). For example, Americans are very individualistic and view their individualism as a positive attribute of their culture that contributes to their success as a nation (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 215). Individualistic cultures place a high value on personal time and work/life balance, freedom of thought and expression, personal accomplishment, and independence (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 220-221). They believe that they are responsible for and to themselves, place a higher degree of importance on money and earnings, and believe that an individual makes better decisions than the group (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 224). In addition to the United States, other highly individualistic countries include Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 222).

Collectivism is often viewed as an Eastern culture dimension, and members of collectivistic cultures may associate the collective with positive feelings of safety and belonging or negative feelings of oppression (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 216). The Chinese and Japanese scored particularly high on the collectivistic side of the dimension, because the success of the group takes priority over the individual and it is understood that the individual will be taken care of as long as the group thrives (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 216). Collective-oriented cultures value the use of skills, cooperation and conformity, order and structure, duty, and traditional points of view, and
believe decisions made by the group are better than those made by individuals (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 227, 230-231). Some countries, including France, Ireland, Spain, and Germany, fall more toward the middle of the individualism-collectivism dimension, balancing appreciation for a rules-based organization with a strict hierarchy with their desire for personal independence (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 221-222).

In an organizational setting, the degree to which a person is individual-oriented or collective-oriented will have a significant impact on the relationship between the person and the organization, affecting decisions about whether or not to comply with organizational norms and the extent to which a person feels that organizational values align with personal values (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 217-218). A culture’s alignment toward individualism or collectivism will also affect the organizational structure and theories about how operations should be managed (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 219). This can create unique challenges in multinational companies if, for example, the host nation of the parent company is individualistic and the host nation of the subsidiary or the personal culture of employees is collectivistic, or vice versa (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 219).

Values and culture, including cultural orientation toward individualism or collectivism, shape all of a person’s actions; however, people who have always lived in only one culture cannot recognize their behavior as culturally driven if they have never mixed with people from other cultures (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 27). As soon as people recognize that culture limits their thoughts and behaviors, they need the influence of other cultures to help them see their limitations and go past them (Hofstede, 1980a, pp. 32, 35). It is only through comparison of one’s own culture to another that new ideas and ways of thinking about the world become possible (Hofstede, 1980a, pp. 32, 35). During his research, Hofstede noted that people from
diverse cultural backgrounds were starting to interact with each other more often and would be expected to work together in an organizational setting, and his cultural dimensions provided a much needed framework for understanding cultural differences and successfully navigating those interactions (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 35).

**Ting Toomey’s Face Negotiation Theory**

Ting-Toomey’s face negotiation theory leverages Hofstede’s dimensions of individualism and collectivism to explain how different cultures value individual versus group rights and the way they communicate and deal with conflict (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 189). Face is the mechanism through which people give and receive respect and honor, convey credibility, status or reputation, and develop family and interpersonal relationships based on trust and loyalty (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 190). A person’s cultural values will determine how he or she makes meaning from situations, thus the process of *self-construal* (constructing face as a ‘social self’ or ‘personal self’) differs from culture to culture (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 188).

A person’s cultural determination toward individualism or collectivism will directly influence his or her approach to facework and conflict situations, in addition to reactions governed directly by face and self-construal (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 190-191; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, pp. 602-603). During facework, each participant will enact strategies to manage one of three types of face concerns: *self-face* or the preservation or defense of self-image; *other-face* or the desire to either support or challenge the other person; and *mutual-face* or the concern for upholding each person’s face or the overall image of the relationship (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 191-192; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 603). Both face and facework are of particular importance in the multinational organization setting, because they
directly tie to the potential for conflict to arise between employees and how employees manage that conflict.

Individualistic cultures focus on self-face in conflict situations, tending more toward dominating, control or forcing the other person into compliance (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 601). Collectivistic cultures try to avoid conflict altogether by being non-confrontational and agreeable, and when faced with a conflict situation are more concerned about other-face, working to smooth things over and end the argument as quickly as possible (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 601). Cultures that fall toward the middle on the individualism-collectivism dimension are more likely to be concerned with mutual-face in a conflict, giving more attention to finding a solution and demonstrating a willingness to compromise by integrating various points of view (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 601). If an individualistic person feels his face is being attacked or challenged he is more likely to blame someone else or the circumstances surrounding the issue in order to save face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). Stating that traffic is to blame for a late arrival to work is an example of blaming external circumstances to preserve self-face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). On the other hand, a collectivistic person will internalize the attack and accept the face loss, attributing his failure to meet a goal or expectation to a lack of effort or incompetence (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192).

Conflict situations can be created by cultural differences, and participants will use their culture-specific facework strategies to navigate these situations with potentially disastrous consequences. For example, cultural differences in face concern and self-construal can lead to conflict when a collectivistic teammate concerned with other-face who is focused on the success and rights of the group finds himself at odds with the individualistic teammate who places greater importance on self-face and her individual job performance and personal rights (Ting-
Toomey, 2010, p. 173). Additionally, conflict resolution styles differ across cultures, where some individuals are more apt to confront another person and others would rather just avoid the situation completely. Team members will have differing expectations about how conflict situations should be interpreted and resolved based on the learned values as well as the type of conflict resolution techniques endorsed by the organization’s culture and workplace values (Ting-Toomey, 2010, p. 174). Despite these cultural differences in facework, self-construal, and face concern, Ting-Toomey argues that it is possible to have successful intercultural interactions if participants work to understand their differences, use that knowledge to view the situation from a different perspective, and make an effort to adapt to the situation and use the most appropriate methods of facework to achieve the best results (Ting-Toomey, 2010, p. 176).

The Literature

**Intercultural Communication – Construction, Conflict and Competence**

In the communication process, culture defines how people interpret messages, the mediums they choose to send messages, the way they structure messages for interpretation by others, and the way they expect their message to be received (Lauring, 2011, p. 234.). People also construct their culture through communication when they use dialogue to define identity, defend a position, or present a point of view, creating boundaries between themselves and others (Byun & Ybema, 2005, p. 537). Intercultural communication therefore becomes a complex process, where degrees of cultural variance in construction and interpretation can lead to dissonance or misunderstandings and hamper the ability to develop and maintain relationships (Lauring, 2011, p. 247; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 88).

Acknowledging the cultural diversity between self and other that guides intercultural interactions can either help communicators respect difference or identify similarities in order to
avoid dissonance, or it can obscure the similarities and reinforce boundaries and perceived differences resulting in alienation and segregation between and among groups (Lauring, 2011, pp. 241-247; Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 69). The more individuals focus on difference the more they reinforce it through their words and actions (Lauring, 2011, pp. 247-248; Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 69). These actions in turn result in a stronger barrier between people that leads to anxiety that further heightens the focus on difference, creating a cycle that can be extremely difficult to break (Lauring, 2011, pp. 247-248; Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 69). Through this process ethnocentrism (a belief that one’s own culture is superior to another) can emerge and contribute to false assumptions and conflict (Lauring, 2011, p. 248).

Culture can also influence what a person wants the outcome of a conflict to be (Lowenstein & Glenville, 1995, pp. 205-206). In an organizational setting, conflict can arise in disciplinary situations or everyday interactions between managers and employees or amongst employees, due to differences in work style, ways of thinking, and preferences related to group participation. Managers and employees need to be aware of and sensitive to these differences to avoid escalating a situation unnecessarily and the increased costs that result from complaints to human resources, legal action, and generally unproductive business (Lauring, 2011, pp. 247-248; Lowenstein & Glenville, 1995, pp. 205-206; Roper, 2011, p. 76; Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 140).

The ability to manage conflict in intercultural interactions depends in part on an individual’s level of intercultural communication competence (ICC). ICC consists of three main components: 1) cultural sensitivity that creates the open-mindedness necessary to understand self and other for the formation of I-Thou relationships; 2) awareness and knowledge of other cultures that allows one to map the differences between one culture and another to reduce
uncertainty and discomfort in interactions; and 3) communication behaviors such as nonverbal and verbal message skills and ability to effectively manage interactions through turn taking (Chen, 2009, pp. 394-396). Adapting one’s communication style, initiating interactions with strangers, having meaningful dialogue, and handling misunderstandings effectively all while interacting with a person or group from a different culture both demonstrate and improve an individual’s ICC (Chen, 2009, pp. 395-398; Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 139; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 95; Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 157). ICC demonstrates empathy and establishes trust and is critical to building effective intercultural relationships and avoiding conflict (Chen, 2009, pp. 393-394; Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 139; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 95; Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 157).

ICC as a skill set is gained through intercultural experiences, openness to learning about other cultures, and willingness to see that there are different ways of viewing the world and getting work done that are not wrong but are simply different (Chen, 2009, p. 394; Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 140; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 98). “Our task, then, is to reach for the unity in human experiences and simultaneously to express diversity” (Kim, 2009, p. 441). It is this tension between the desire to maintain national culture expression and still build relationships with others that makes the same intercultural interactions that help build ICC so challenging (Kim, 2009, p. 441). Repeatedly experiencing intercultural interactions that challenge an individual’s concepts of self and others have the power to transform the individual (Kim, 2009, p. 441). However, those interactions can also create stress due to discomfort and conflict that may prompt an individual to withdraw and revert back to interacting strictly with his or her own culture instead of adapting to the situation (Kim, 2009, p. 441). This cycle of growth and withdrawal is referred to as the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Kim, 2009, p. 442). As a
person continues to grow and develop more intercultural competency, the stress of intercultural interactions decreases and the ability to adapt to different cultures increases (Kim, 2009, p. 442).

**Intercultural Communication Challenges in Multinational Organizations**

Multicultural organizations face a particular set of challenges attempting to bring together people from all different cultures and their unique set of life experiences, needs and wants (Lewis, French, & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 108-109). Simply co-locating culturally diverse employees within an organizational site does not mean that they are going to interact and communicate with members of different cultures (Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 159). There is a significant amount of thought that goes into whether or not to engage with another person, contribute to a group discussion, or to stay within the boundary of familiarity (Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 160). Even if the organization is fortunate to employ a large number of individuals who bring a high degree of ICC to their interactions, there are specific issues of organizational interaction that can still create opportunities for dissonance and conflict. For example, supervisor-subordinate relationship dynamics add a layer of complexity on top of culture that can make discussions about performance evaluation and recognition (or lack thereof) within the organization even more difficult. Byun and Ybema are critical of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory and do not recommend using it to inform intercultural research precisely because the dimensions do not adequately capture these types of complex everyday interactions that occur in an intercultural organizational setting (2005, p. 536).

The situational context plays a key role in the degree of intercultural demands on the participants, sometimes overriding dimensions of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures and their associated communication preferences and facework strategies (Durant & Shepherd, 2009, pp. 150-151, 155). However, intercultural communication can also be unpredictable, in that
people from two different cultures may have no difficulty communicating at all (Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 156). In their report on cultural differences between Japanese and Dutch employees working in a Japanese multinational company with a subsidiary located in the Netherlands, Byun and Ybema argue that Hofstede oversimplifies cultural interactions by creating dimensions of behavior based on a few general characteristics while ignoring individual identity as well as the situational and relational aspects of interaction (2005, p. 536).

Hofstede focused on self-perceptions of national groups as apparently objective descriptions, disconnected from any social context. . . . A description of the way people characterize their own culture without any reference to an outside party may not be very informative when cultures are actually created in everyday encounters in organizations (Byun & Ybema, 2005, p. 550).

Cultural differences can exacerbate the typical organizational problems of inequality in power and political relationships, structuring of reward programs, and the perceived availability of opportunities for advancement (Byun & Ybema, 2005, p. 537). Even the observance of national holidays can be challenging, as the organization must decide whether the subsidiary office will follow the host nation’s holiday schedule or the parent nation’s holiday schedule, putting the company at risk of excluding many nationalities and cultures either way (Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 95). The diversity of the workforce also creates inherent opportunities for conflict because of differences in cultural values and different ways of interpreting manager and peer interactions and decisions that can create tensions between the different groups (Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 204).

Managers in particular will face challenges if they lack the intercultural competencies noted above that are necessary to manage a culturally diverse workforce (Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 208; Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 105). A leader with a higher degree of ICC will be better able to successfully navigate his or her own interactions with
employees and govern interactions amongst employees to ensure harmony and minimize conflict. Problems can arise from lack of awareness on the supervisor’s part of how different individuals from different national cultures are motivated, inadvertent insensitivity to an employee or cultural group, or failing to create balance in key areas such as acknowledgment and recognition across employees from different national cultures (Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 208; Roper, 2011, p. 76; Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 105). Differences in employee perceptions regarding who a manager focuses time and attention on, who gets the benefit of the doubt in conflict situations, what is a demand versus a request, and whether someone is being persuasive or aggressive can all influence whether or not an employee will take on a task assignment and may be destructive to the relationship (Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 204; Roper, 2011, p. 76). The organizational trend toward globalization and the predominance of multinational organizations is steadily increasing, becoming a business necessity and creating opportunities for employees and managers who are competent intercultural communicators to carve out a niche for themselves. In order to succeed, managers and organizations must see their teams as collections of individuals where each person has a unique set of needs and a preferred way of doing things, create new ways of approaching work in order to integrate each member of the team, and understand the role that ICC plays in creating cohesive teams (Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 208; Ching-Hsiang and Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 138).

**Organizational Culture versus National Culture**

Each employee in an organization carries the organizational culture with him or her. Organizational culture differs from national culture in the sense that it can be accepted by someone not born into it but still functions as a mental collective that defines group membership and how one group differs from another (Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, 2010, pp. 47,
344-345). Through communication, people form the rules and identity of organizational culture and establish a narrative that weaves together different groups and represents the organization itself (Taylor, 2006, pp. 135,138; Baxter, 2006, p. 106). National or primary culture affects the organizational culture when individuals bring their own national culture to work every day, and organizational culture is comprised of values and beliefs of the individuals in the organization as well as the policies and processes established by the organization (Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 90).

An organizational culture communicates and guides the goals and strategy of the organization and helps an organization effectively manage diversity by establishing norms (both formal and informal) that help guide behaviors and set expectations for how conflict will be addressed, giving employees a set of values to follow when making decisions and interpreting situations, actions and individuals, something that unites individuals toward the common goal while allowing them to preserve their differences (Polat, 2012, p. 1411, 1416; Lowenstein & Glanville, 1995, p. 207; Schneider, 1988, p. 232; Conrad & Poole, 2005, p. 156; Gao, 2010, pp. 101-102). Organizational culture will also help determine whether or not intercultural interactions will occur and with what frequency, as well as the level of interaction quality and relationships that form as a result (Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 160).

Multinational companies must consistently manage their staff around the globe in order to maintain their corporate identity and provide a unique value or service to their customers that will differentiate them from the competition. However, they must balance those efforts with the need to differentiate or adapt the organizational culture to meet the culturally diverse needs of employees in subsidiary locations, to ensure that employees feel they belong and are motivated to form and maintain efficient teams (Pinzaru & Galalae, 2009, p. 246). If supervisors seek only
to enforce the organizational culture at the expense of national culture, through dominant communication styles or by enforcing policies that homogenize differences, the relationship between the organization and its employees will suffer and the company will not succeed.

Thus, this is the challenge of diversity and multiculturalism: how does one demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the uniqueness of each supervisee while at the same time showing the ability to hold that same supervisee accountable for meeting expectations that are informed by the cultural norms of the campus? (Roper, 2011, p. 73).

In a “majority rules” organizational environment, leaders play a critical role in creating the balance necessary to help employees succeed, by translating the organizational values into a framework applicable to employees’ daily organizational life, reinforcing the culture through communication, and demonstrating through their actions that they live the values themselves (Roper, 2033, p. 73; Conrad & Poole, 2005, pp. 178-180). Through these behaviors, supervisors demonstrate a level of ICC that helps them bridge the gaps amongst the diverse national cultures of the employees and between the individual and organizational cultures. If employees have multiple experiences that run contrary to the organization’s values or their own cultural values, they will begin to critique the organizational culture and view the values as false and the culture as manipulative (Conrad & Poole, 2005, pp. 154, 178). For example, if employees feel pressure to alter their individualistic or collectivistic values toward work/life balance or personal empowerment or that they have lost face during the course of a negative performance evaluation, they will be less likely to align with the organizational culture and may perceive it as detrimental to their own well being (Conrad & Poole, 2005, pp. 154, 163).

Rationale for the Study

The theory and literature presented provide a basis to help researchers understand culture and its influence, the difficulties involved with communication across cultures, and how both culture and intercultural communication can play out in the specific context of a multinational
organization. Culture shapes all aspects of a person’s daily life, including his personal and professional values and how those values are expressed both in social and organizational settings. Differences among cultures in collectivistic versus individualistic orientation will influence how a person handles conflict situations and whether or not he feels that his values align with those of the organization. Cultural orientation toward individualism or collectivism is constructed through our daily conversations with those around us and affects whether or not relationships are built or destroyed. These intercultural interactions have incredible potential to generate conflict and end in disaster, just as much as they have the potential to create understanding and new awareness of different cultures that contributes to a person’s intercultural communication competence and the effectiveness of future interactions.

Existing organizational communication theory is very specific to the culture in which it originated (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 113-114). American cultural values frame the majority of existing theories, and theories that have attempted to bridge culture and organizational knowledge have been too narrowly focused on specific extremes of dimensions of culture (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 113-114). The growing multinational nature of business has made some of these theories less credible, as organizations have been unsuccessful applying organizational theories based on the parent nation’s culture to host or subsidiary locations with a different national culture (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 113-114). The more research studies are executed within organizations comprised of a culturally diverse set of employees, the more the theories will either become proven and validated or disproven and restructured, contributing to the ultimate goal of a greater depth of knowledge about what specifically contributes to intercultural communication dissonance in multinational organizations.
and how organizational culture helps to intensify or resolve those issues (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, pp. 121-122).

Multinational organizations present a unique opportunity for further research in intercultural communication, because the presence of many different national cultures in the organization creates inherent opportunities for conflict in employee-employee, employee-supervisor, and employee-organization relationships. The organization’s culture can create an environment where individuals can maintain their national cultural identity while still aligning with the needs and values of the organization. Existing research demonstrates that top managers need to understand the different factors motivating different subordinates, how to drive job satisfaction for each individual, and how individuals might prefer different leadership styles, arguing against an equal treatment or one-size-fits all approach (Lewis, French, Phetmany, 2000, p. 120). Furthermore, the research has demonstrated that the situation influences the perception and influence of cultural differences, making it imperative to understand the specific conditions that may amplify cultural differences and lead to more emotionally charged interactions (Byun & Ybema, 2005, p. 551). However, additional research is necessary in order to create understanding of the specific ways in which organizational culture must be structured in order to maintain the balance between individual and organizational needs, values, and cultures.

It is necessary to dig into the underlying assumptions members carry with them from their own cultures and how those assumptions influence their perceptions of the expected behaviors, symbols, and values of the organization, in order to understand what the organizational culture means to members (Schneider, 1988, p. 233). Only by doing this is it possible to determine if the organizational culture achieves its goals by creating an environment where employees feel their national culture diversity is respected and acknowledged in everyday
interactions and in the more complex situations of performance evaluation and recognition. That achievement is measured by the extent to which employees integrate the organization’s values into their daily lives to facilitate the sharing of a common point of view among employees and minimize dissonance and conflict, or if they simply comply by suppressing and never actually adapting their individual views (Sathe, 1983, p.10; Schneider, 1988, p. 233).

This study provides a unique opportunity to conduct such an assessment on a culturally diverse Collections team within a multinational organization’s offices in Ireland. Determining whether or not dissonance occurs in employee-employee and employee-supervisors relationships as a result of national and organizational cultural expectations surrounding performance evaluation and recognition can help guide policy development within multinational organizations with regard to these topics. Evaluating the effectiveness of the organizational culture in minimizing conflict that arises due to cultural differences, specifically pertaining to these two key areas of performance evaluation and recognition, can surface best practices or examples of dissonance that can shape the guidelines for diversity management through organizational culture. Identifying the roles that individual ICC and dialogue play in shaping intercultural organizational interactions can also inform recruiting practices. Ultimately, what remains to be seen is how an organization can create a strategy that ethically capitalizes on cultural diversity, by creating an organizational culture that promotes respect for cultural diversity through differentiated leadership styles based on the individual or situation. Thus the theory and literature come together to encourage a targeted study about intercultural interactions in a multinational organization and inform the following research questions:

RQ1: How equitable is the recognition for the culturally specific skill sets present in the call center?
RQ2: How well are the labor differences involved in collecting in different countries being recognized?

RQ3: How culturally sensitive is the recognition structure promoted by the organization’s formal performance evaluation system?

RQ4: How well does the organization demonstrate its core value of honoring diversity to its employees?

Conducting a study such as this, that seeks to identify the differences in teammate preferences regarding recognition and performance appraisal in a multinational organization versus the organization’s culture surrounding evaluation and recognition, will provide insight into how organizational culture can be specifically structured and operationalized to create a more inclusive and culturally sensitive work environment.
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

The study focused on a specific international call center division within a multinational organization with a particularly diverse set of employees. The primary function of the division is collecting negative balances owed for online payment accounts. The employees in the International Collections division are located across two of the company’s European offices in Dublin and Dundalk, Ireland, along with thousands of other members of the organization. All employees located at these two Irish offices are given the same set number of company paid holidays based on the Irish national holiday schedule. The International Collections division consists of a Senior Manager, call center agents, supervisors, and support staff. For the purpose of this study, only the call center agents and their supervisors were included. The support staff and the Senior Manager were not included.

Within the European collections division, the 90 customer-facing call center agents are grouped into six teams: two serving customers in the United Kingdom, three serving customers in Germany, and one “Rest of the World” team serving customers in Italy, China, Spain, the Netherlands, France and Australia. Employees are required to speak in the customer’s native language when attempting to collect balances, which may be Cantonese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish. The majority of the supervisors also speak the native languages of the customers their teams are interacting with. The Rest of the World supervisor speaks Spanish and English, while the customers the team serves speak French, Dutch, Italian, Chinese, Spanish, and English. There are also two Irish supervisors managing German teams. Performance of all 90 employees is measured on a monthly basis using a scorecard with a single set of standards applicable to all teams.
The study was conducted over a two-week period at the Dublin and Dundalk sites. The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of the organization’s culture overall, with a particular emphasis on the management of employee diversity and intercultural interactions. The Collections division was chosen specifically because the employees within the division represent approximately 20 different nationalities and a mixture of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. These employees experience intercultural interactions and communication challenges on a daily basis that are representative of the types of experiences faced by employees throughout the company. For these reasons, the data gathered by studying the Collections division proved particularly useful in answering the research questions. In addition to providing insight into employee experiences within the Collections division, the broader understanding of teammate experiences within the organization illustrated how effectively the organization delivers on its commitment to respect and honor the diversity of its employees. The study also uncovered information and hypotheses that can be used to guide research about issues specific to cultural diversity within other multinational organizations. It was an exploratory rather than exhaustive study, designed to show the benefit of doing additional research within and across multinational organizations. The study aimed to provide further understanding of issues related to intercultural communication, employee accommodation and recognition within multinational organizations, and the ways organizational culture can influence the outcomes of those issues and interactions.

Methodology

Sample

When conducting intercultural research in a multinational organization, the decision about whom to collect data from is a particularly critical component (Sarbaugh, 1984, p. 74).
The sample selection determines the quality and accuracy of the study and the ability to provide answers to the research questions and make broader generalizations about intercultural interactions in multinational organizations based on the data gathered in the study (Sarbaugh, 1984, p. 74). The goal of this study was to obtain a random sample of participants representing each of the eight different countries served by the Collections division. During the first week of the study, 90 customer-facing employees and 7 supervisors were introduced to the background of the study and the purpose of the research during team meetings. Following the meetings, emails were sent to members of each team asking for volunteers to participate in either one-on-one interviews or focus groups. Interested participants responded via email and were scheduled for interviews or focus groups depending on their expressed preference. All seven supervisors were asked to participate in one focus group. At the end of the two-week study, a survey was sent to all 97 employees.

**Interview Methods**

Interviewing participants in an intercultural research study can introduce specific complications. The act of participating in an interview may be out of the ordinary in certain cultures, contributing to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty (Neuman, 2006, p. 442). The researcher must be able to work around potential language barriers and have an awareness that different cultures vary in their expectations regarding privacy and confidentiality, as well as the amount of time and methods involved in establishing trust and rapport between interviewee and researcher (Neuman, 2006, pp. 391, 443). In a call center environment, researchers must also be sensitive to balancing the scheduling and timing of interviews in a way that does not disrupt the business. All of that being said, interviews are an effective qualitative research tool used to gain
an understanding of intercultural communication behaviors and the influence of national culture on perceptions and actions (Rubin, R.B., Rubin, A.M., Haridakis, & Piele, 2010, p. 221).

Interviews are typically conducted with two participants (the researcher and the interviewee) and may take place face-to-face or over the phone (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 78; Neuman, 2006, pp. 300-301). Interviews give researchers an opportunity to connect with participants one-on-one and for longer periods of time than survey questionnaires or focus groups may allow (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 221). Face-to-face interviews provide the added advantage to the researcher of the ability to observe nonverbal cues and surroundings (Neuman, 2006, p. 301). Though they typically follow a particular structure in terms of the specific questions and the order in which they are asked, interviews provide researchers with the flexibility not available in a survey format to probe participants for additional input related to certain responses (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 221).

For this study, a series of 10, 45-minute face-to-face interviews were scheduled with the call center agents. The participants who volunteered for the interviews represented nine different nationalities and seven of the eight different markets that the division collects payments for. The interviews followed a guided and semi-structured format, an approach allowing the researcher to use a particular set of topics, themes, and a few predetermined questions to guide the interview while retaining the flexibility to vary the order of topics discussed and specific wording of the questions in each interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 82). The interview topics and questions were designed to inform answers to the research questions, but did not identically mirror the research questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 79). Questions were primarily open-ended to encourage discussion amongst participants and indirect in nature due to the
sensitivity of the topics of intercultural communication dissonance, cultural acknowledgment and performance recognition raised by the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 83).

The interviews followed an *emotionalist* or *subjectivist* approach, aimed at gathering feedback regarding participants’ real-life experiences within their specific division and the broader organization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 79). In this type of interview, the focus is not so much on facts and historical events as much as it is on the perceptions, understandings, and emotions of participants involved, as they recount events and interactions from their own point of view (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 79, 81). The goal of the interviews was to dig into individual perceptions regarding the following key topics: performance evaluation and recognition; whether or not cultural diversity is acknowledged and supported within the participant’s team, the division, and the organization overall; interactions with fellow employees from different cultural backgrounds; and how supervisors and senior leaders demonstrate support for diversity within and across the teams and the division.

**Focus Group Methods**

Focus groups took the interview practices into a group setting, providing a comfortable environment that encouraged discussion amongst group members, teasing out further dialogue than what may have occurred in the individual interviews (Neuman, 2006, p. 412). Focus groups are particularly popular and useful in business communication research, to help the researcher understand employees’ views about the organization and how employees interact with each other (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 174-175). They also provide the opportunity to observe how employees construct a shared understanding of the organization’s culture and narrate daily experiences within the organization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 175).
One potential drawback to focus groups is that one or more persons can dominate conversation or steer it in a particular direction, and groups require careful moderation to ensure the discussion stays on topic and each person has a chance to speak (Neuman, 2006, p. 412; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 222). While some participants may have felt that the focus groups took the pressure off and allowed them to formulate answers and thoughts, others may have found the focus groups intimidating if they were shy or less articulate than other members of the group (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 177). Other members of the group may act as spokespersons for the group and speak on behalf of others or claim to have special insight into the group’s culture or how interactions occur within the group, when in fact they have no particular authority to make such claims (Sarbaugh, 1984, p. 75). The dominant communication style of some participants may discourage some employees from speaking up if they believe their views or experiences differ greatly from the group norm (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 177). When conducting focus groups, it is also important to be aware that certain members of the group selected for the study may not be permitted to talk to outsiders or may feel uncomfortable doing so (Sarbaugh, 1984, p. 75). There may also be certain topics of discussion a researcher may wish to pursue related to intercultural study that violate norms of interaction or behavior within the group being studied or within the organization (Sarbaugh, 1984, p. 75).

In the focus group setting, dialogue occurs more between participants than between the researcher and participants, generating potential for positive results from the discussion amongst participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 173; Neuman, 2006, p. 412). For example, participants may begin to question information provided by others in the group, answer questions others raise in regards to the research, help each other recall events, or spark others to think about things they had perhaps forgotten or had not thought about before at all or in the same
context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 173; Neuman, 2006, p. 412). This type of discussion benefits the study when information is provided that may not have been uncovered through the researcher’s questions alone. Focus groups may also generate ideas and more detailed discussion about experiences that may not be fully developed in an interview setting (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 175). For example, a researcher can gain an understanding of how participants interact and talk to each other about the research topics, how they react to viewpoints different than their own, and how they construct a shared reality (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 173-174; Neuman, 2006, p. 412). This insight adds significant value when conducting intercultural research in a multinational organization.

The underlying goal of the agent focus groups matched that of the interviews, where perceptions and emotions were key. The topics and themes discussed remained the same: performance evaluation and recognition, acknowledgment of and support for diversity at the team, division, and organizational level, and teammate perceptions of their supervisors’ and senior leader’s behaviors specific to intercultural interactions. In order to effectively contribute to the study, a minimum of two focus groups about the study topic(s) is recommended (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 222). For this study, three agent focus groups were scheduled: two in Dundalk with four participants each and one in Dublin with five participants. Once the list of volunteers was compiled, the focus groups were carefully constructed so that there were at least two different markets represented by each group and that the employees’ national cultures were as mixed as possible. Despite some last-minute cancellations by attendees the diversity of each group was maintained. The first Dundalk focus group included two participants from the German market who were both non-native German speakers and one participant from the UK market who was a non-native English speaker. The second focus group in Dundalk included two native German
speakers from the German market and one Irish teammate from the UK market. In Dublin, the
group consisted of three native German speakers from the German market, one Mauritian
teammate from the French market, and one native Spanish speaker from the Spanish market.

One supervisor focus group was held across two hour-long sessions with a total of seven
participants. Video conferencing was used to conduct the focus group with supervisors from
both the Dublin and Dundalk sites at the same time. The supervisor focus group centered on
specific skills supervisors use to manage culturally diverse teams and navigate intercultural
interactions, and how they deal with the unique challenges that arise during discussions with
employees about performance, recognition, and job expectations. Supervisors were also
encouraged to discuss their intercultural interactions with each other and how the organization’s
culture influenced interactions amongst employees and between supervisors and employees
within the division. Finally, they were asked to discuss how they believed employees expected
to be managed as it pertained to cultural differences within and amongst the teams, recognition,
and performance coaching.

**Survey Methods**

Effective intercultural research relies heavily on qualitative methods such as focus groups
and interviews, because they are sensitive to the complex, situational and transactional nature of
communication (Kim, 1984, p. 25). However, it is important to incorporate a variety of research
methods to complement the limitations inherent in each of the methods and create a holistic set
of data to inform the research questions (Kim, 1984, pp. 26-27). Self-administered online
surveys were added to the research methodology to balance the limitations of the interviews and
focus groups. The surveys provided the opportunity to gather input from a large number of
people to both substantiate and validate the information obtained through the focus groups and interviews (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 219).

The surveys provided participants with anonymity, an important component to gathering personal opinions about sensitive topics (Neuman, 2006, p. 299; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 219). This proved particularly useful to conducting research within a multinational organization, when participants were being asked to evaluate the effectiveness of supervisors’ efforts to manage cultural diversity and whether or not dissonant interactions were occurring between employees and supervisors. Employees who elected not to participate in interviews or focus groups may have felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts or ideas through the survey. The survey also gave focus group and interview participants the chance to share thoughts that developed post-participation, elaborate on experiences not fully shared, or express ideas they were not comfortable asking about or discussing in front of the group. The potential drawbacks to the surveys included: low response rates, lack of control over conditions influencing a person’s decision to complete the survey and the quality of the answers, inability to ask probing questions in order to clarify incomplete responses, and the inability to observe participant reactions to certain questions (Neuman, 2006, p. 299).

At the end of the two-week study, two surveys were distributed to employees of the Collections division in the Dublin and Dundalk sites. One survey was sent out to all of the 90 call center agents and the other was sent to the 7 supervisors. Due to the limited audience for the supervisor survey and the identifying demographic questions, anonymity could not be completely assured for the respondents. Both surveys were administered in English and contained a set of closed-ended questions to identify nationality, primary and secondary languages spoken, length of time living in Ireland, and length of time working for the company.
The surveys then diverged into separate question sets, and the questions asked participants to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements on a five-point scale. The questions were presented in a combination of closed and open-ended formats, where participants were given the opportunity to supplement or explain their responses by filling out a comment box on each question in addition to choosing their rating. Questions were carefully constructed to avoid jargon and abbreviations, emotional language, and vagueness (Neuman, 2006, p. 278). Questions were structured with neutral language to avoid leading participants to particular answers based on the wording of the question or the value statements associated with the rating scale, and questions pertained to the individual’s perceptions and knowledge (Neuman, 2006, pp. 279-280).

**Validity and Reliability of the Methods**

Interpretive social science such as intercultural communication research typically involves qualitative research methods, because the research is geared toward understanding how people interact with each other and whether or not dissonance is occurring in those interactions (Neuman, 2006, pp. 88, 151; Ting-Toomey, 1984, pp. 178-179). Qualitative research methods present inherent challenges with validity and reliability, because the methods obtain point-in-time observations, and multiple truths may exist for the various participants in a qualitative study (Neuman, 2006, p. 196; Ting-Toomey, 1984, p. 179). Validity or truth in qualitative research results is obtained if the researcher is able to accurately describe the point of view and feelings of the participants in a way that allows others to enter the reality of the participants and guarantee that the description is correct (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 292; Neuman, 2006, pp. 92, 197). Reliability typically refers to results reliability, which establishes consistency in research and is demonstrated by the extent to which the qualitative methods used in a study would provide
the same results if the study were repeated by another researcher (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 292). However, measurement reliability is a slightly different definition, and it speaks to the effectiveness of the study methods in obtaining accurate responses from participants (Neuman, 2006, p. 198). The process of generating several comparison groups through multiple interviews and focus groups afforded this study *maximized comparisons*, or enough meaningful insights to create a comprehensive understanding of the research topics (Ting-Toomey, 1984, p. 179). Maximized comparisons contributed to the validity and measurement reliability of the study. Using a random sample of volunteer participants also contributed to the validity of the study, allowing inferences to be made about the experiences of all employees based on the study population (Neuman, 2006, pp. 227, 242). Results reliability remains difficult to obtain in qualitative research, because of the fact that multiple factors can influence participant responses in a focus group or interview situation (Neuman, 2006, p. 196; Ting-Toomey, 1984, p. 179). For example, with this particular study participant responses could change if the study were executed again six months from now, due to changes in the organization, a specific negative interaction with a teammate or supervisor, or a particularly successful performance evaluation that left an impression on the individual.

The two qualitative methods were triangulated with a third quantitative method, to further establish validity and reliability of the data obtained (Neuman, 2006, pp. 149-150). As such, the goal of the survey was not to provide in-depth statistical data in a traditionally quantitative manner, but to simply supplement the results of the focus groups and interviews and increase the overall sample size. Specific consideration was given to *content validity* when building the survey, obtained by asking an appropriate number of clearly constructed questions in order to derive a thorough understanding of employees’ and supervisors’ intercultural experiences.
pertaining to recognition and acknowledgment of diversity (Neuman, 2006, p. 193; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 203).

**Ethical Considerations**

The research topic and methodologies to be used for the study were discussed with senior leaders within the organization to secure necessary approvals prior to commencing the study. Verbal permission to include employees of the organization in the study was also obtained. There was no express or implied sponsorship of the research effort by the organization in the form of financial or other compensation to the researcher in exchange for the research report, even though the organization provided consent for the study and facilitated access to employees as study participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 66). The research topic and methods used were at the sole discretion of the researcher and were not directed or altered by the organization in which the study was conducted (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 67). The study was conducted under the basic premise of doing no harm to participants, ensuring that participation was voluntary and all participants were treated with respect (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 62, 70-72; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 204).

Employees were verbally reminded at the beginning of each interview and focus group session that participation was voluntary, they were free to leave the discussion room at any time, and participation in the study was not a condition of their continued employment with the organization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 70-71; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 204). Focus group and interview sessions were recorded only after receiving the express verbal consent of all participants involved in the discussion (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 81). Participants were informed that the views and beliefs discussed during the sessions would remain confidential and were asked not to disclose information shared by others during the sessions with other employees.
in the organization. Participants were also informed that the thoughts and ideas expressed during the discussions would not be attributed to any specific participant by name, but would be grouped with other responses to make generalized statements in response to the research questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 73-74; Neuman, 2006, p. 413; Rubin et al., 2010, p. 205). This step was particularly important in the organizational setting, where feedback from the participants may reflect negatively on the leadership team with whom the research results would later be shared (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 66). Focus groups with agents were conducted separately from the supervisor groups, to ensure that participants were allowed to express themselves openly without concern for repercussions. However, employees who participated in the focus groups may have still felt the need to withhold some information when discussing their interactions with and opinions about their supervisors, because they were sharing the information in front of other employees.

The survey contained a similar message to participants regarding voluntary participation and confidentiality when it was distributed. There were no questions contained in the survey that might identify the respondent by name, ensuring that participants were allowed to provide open and honest feedback (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 73-74; Neuman, 2006, p. 313). The self-administered, online survey was constructed using a secure website service that generated a unique link for the survey that ensured the results would be accessible only by the researcher (Neuman, 2006, p. 302). The survey link was emailed to prospective participants’ work email addresses to ensure successful distribution and equal access to the survey using Internet browser software available on all participants’ workstations (Neuman, 2006, p. 302). All of the aforementioned ethical considerations guided the researcher during the study, safeguarding the
participants, the researcher, the study results, and the overall integrity of the communication research field.
Chapter 4: The Study

In multinational organizations, intercultural interactions are a part of everyday life and intercultural communication dissonance is likely to occur. The Collections division within the organization selected for this study provided a representative sample of the communication that occurs between other employees within the same organization, which was useful for determining whether or not employees feel the organization is living up to its commitment to create an environment where cultural diversity is respected. The study may also provide insight into the types of challenges employees of other multinational organizations may face in their daily interactions with each other. As a result, the study may encourage other researchers and organizations to conduct additional research, in order to further the business community’s understanding of the influence of organizational culture and employees’ national culture on daily life within an organization.

This study specifically focused on intercultural interactions amongst employees and between employees and supervisors. The specific purpose was to understand how organizational and national culture influence discussions about performance evaluation and recognition. The study set out to identify causes of any intercultural communication dissonance, how dissonance is being prevented or resolved, how employees expect supervisors to acknowledge culture-specific skillsets and manage cultural differences, and how employees balance their national culture with the organization’s expectations. Lessons learned by studying this organization may help other multinational organizations develop or improve policies to create an organizational culture that effectively supports and manages cultural diversity and hire culturally competent employees.
Data Analysis

Including as many culturally diverse participants from the Collections division as possible was a primary goal, in order to adequately address the research questions. The study was introduced to all members of the Collections division at the beginning of the two-week time period and volunteers were solicited for participation in focus groups and interviews. A series of interviews were conducted with employees from Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, Russia, Ireland, and China. Focus group volunteers were assigned to one of three sessions, each with a mixture of four to five employees from different cultures. Focus groups one and two in Dundalk included employees working in the UK and German markets, who were Chinese, German, Italian, and Irish. The third group in Dublin included employees from Mauritius, Germany, and Spain, who work on the German and Rest of the World teams. Employees who responded to the survey represented 12 different countries in total, including Ecuador, Poland, and Nigeria, which were not represented in the focus groups and interviews.

Survey results were organized using descriptive statistics, a simple statistical means of identifying basic patterns in the data (Neuman, 2006, p. 347). Responses were categorized using frequency distribution, displaying the number of responses in each answer option as a percentage of total responses (Neuman, 2006, p. 347). Free form comments provided by respondents to supplement answers to specific questions were added to the focus group and interview results for more detailed analysis.

Content analysis, a systematic examination of data using a specific coding scheme, was used to identify specific themes and patterns from interviews, focus groups, and survey comments (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 187). Starting with an open coding method, statements and concepts expressed by participants were documented as key words, phrases and
sentences, and direct quotes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 160, 164). Using axial coding, related concepts and statements were linked together and grouped into categories and subcategories, to evaluate connections between the categories (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 161, 165). Selective coding was used to further refine and reorganize the results, in order to determine key data points or themes to present as findings in connection with the research questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 165-166).

Results

Three unifying themes were identified, each with subtopics of discussion, that demonstrate the role national and organizational cultures plays in the organization. First, national culture and culture membership shapes the business operations and establishes a context within which behaviors can be understood as individuals enact their national culture. Second, the labor differences involved in collecting in multiple different cultures are presented. The influence of national culture on customer interactions, employees’ reactions to the organization’s performance evaluation and recognition systems, and supervisor’s management of employee expectations and perceptions are discussed. Third, the results reveal how intercultural communication competence and organizational culture shape interactions between employees and help minimize conflict.

The influence of culture and culture membership.

How culture shapes the business.

The parent organization’s culture drives certain company policies and ways of doing business that do not necessarily resonate with customers from different cultures. Multiple employees mentioned that using American policies and tactics to collect in countries with different attitudes toward debt and credit yields different levels of success in every market. For
example, employees noted the company’s policy to refer a customer to an outside collection agency (OCA) at a certain stage of delinquency is perceived differently by different cultures.

Employees perceive that customers in the United Kingdom (UK) are not typically intimidated by the OCA approach and are not incented to pay to avoid referral to the OCA. UK customers rank near the top of the individualistic index, placing a high degree of value or emphasis on belief in their own decisions and opinions (Hofstede, 1983, p. 62). If a UK customer decides he will pay the debt in his own way and on his own terms, he may not perceive the OCA referral as a threat or conflict and may not feel a need to enact facework to preserve self-face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 191, 199). Conversely, employees perceive that German and Chinese customers view the OCA referral negatively, as a threat or consequence. These two cultures share a similar reaction, but they rank quite differently on Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism index and would employ different facework strategies in connection with the threat of referral to the OCA. Germans are aligned with individualism, though not as strongly as UK customers, and may enact strategies to preserve self-face because of a perception that the referral to the OCA is a threat to their individual financial security (Hofstede, 1983, p. 62; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p 199). Chinese customers are collectivistic and derive identity and status from social and organizational relationships (Hofstede, 1983, p. 62). As a result, they may perceive the OCA referral as potentially damaging to their relationship with the organization, and their facework strategy would center on mutual-face to ensure the approval of and ongoing relationship with the organization (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 199).

The company’s online payment service has been adopted well by most markets and cultures. However, employees noted the ways customers use their accounts varies greatly across cultures. The variance leads to many different reasons for negative balances and impacts
employees’ ability to collect those balances. Different cultures also have different strategies for resolving their negative balances, due in part to different payment methods available in their respective countries. This impacts the bottom line for dollars collected in each market on a monthly basis. Employees are also aware that regulatory environments vary from market to market, based on cultural differences in attitudes toward privacy and financial security, requiring the use of different dialing strategies and technologies in each market. All of these cultural variables contribute to the complexity of conducting a multinational collections business. The degree of understanding the organization and employees have for these cultural differences will determine the company’s success or failure in each of the markets it serves (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 294).

Employees navigate these difficulties on a daily basis when interacting with customers. Across the focus groups and interviews there was consensus that the negative balance is generally easiest to collect in the UK market, because customers understand the reason for the debt and are more willing to provide a credit card or other form of payment. Employees working the Chinese and Italian markets perceive that they experience the most difficulty collecting from their customers due to high instances of fraud, cultural attitudes toward debt, and cultural limitations in payment options. Most employees and supervisors are aware of and sympathetic to these nuances. Understanding the culture of the customer contributes greatly to employees’ ability to successfully create a favorable impression of the business and interact with customers.

Collectors’ national culture membership has privileges.

Being a member of a particular national culture provides individuals with access to certain insider information. As members of a culture, employees understand how others who share their culture expect to be treated, the way they perceive certain situations or circumstances,
the way they think about things, and the right way to use the culture’s common language (Caputo et al. 2002, p. 297). As one employee explained:

When you’ve lived in a country and you know how people are, you know what you can and can’t say. (German employee 2)

For example, German employees described differences in the way people within their culture expect to be addressed. A person who has achieved a certain level of status or power due to financial gain or simply age may expect to be addressed more formally or politely, while a parent or sibling may allow a more casual and informal language structure. German employees stated that when they make outbound calls, they must ask for their customers using their title and last name, rather than asking for them by first name only. On the other hand, employees said when calling customers in the UK or Australia, it is acceptable to ask for the customer by first name only or first and last name. Deferring to a cultural preference toward being addressed formally versus informally is an example of giving other-face, and reflects a level of intercultural communication competence that helps avoid conflict in interactions (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, pp. 603-604).

Even within what outwardly appears to be the homogenous culture of a single country, such as Germany, employees identified variations in the way both the culture and language are constructed due to geographic or economic differences. Language can appear as a unifying thread, but employees expressed agreement that learning a language doesn’t automatically qualify a person for cultural membership. Regional variations in language can make it seem as though people from the same culture are speaking an entirely different language and can lead to miscommunication (Caputo et al., 2002, pp. 309-310). Employees were quick to point out that they are not all the same:

Just because we work in the same market and speak the same
language doesn’t mean we share the same cultural background.  
(French employee 2)

While culture membership affords a unique level of understanding to each employee, differences within and across cultures became clear as employees discussed interactions with customers from other cultures.

**Managing the labor differences involved in collecting in different cultures.**

*Interactions with customers.*

Culture influences the way customers perceive efforts to collect a debt, availability of and access to credit, how credit is used, and many other aspects of personal finances. The table below illustrates the various different markets that the organization collects balances in, the cultural alignment of each market on the individualism-collectivism (IC) dimension and their IC index score, as well as their primary face concern in a perceived conflict or face-threatening situation.

**Table 1.1 – Market alignment on the IC dimension and corresponding face concerns.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market</th>
<th>IC Dimension Value</th>
<th>Face Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Individualism (67)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Collectivism (25, 17)&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Other-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Individualism (89, 70)&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Individualism (90)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Individualism (76)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Individualism (80)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Dependent Individualism (50)&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Individualism (71)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores represent Hong Kong (25) and Taiwan (17). Scores represent Great Britain (89) and Ireland (70). Spain falls in the middle of the index yielding a hybrid value of dependent individualism, indicating a need for authority and hierarchy while maintaining personal independence.

National culture membership allows employees to adjust their manner of speaking and introduce the attempt to collect the debt in a manner in which a customer from the same culture might expect to receive it. Employees who speak multiple languages and support multiple markets noted it is particularly difficult to switch back and forth between calls in different markets because of the need to make these adjustments. Three German market employees able to work in other markets mentioned that being allotted more time to switch back and forth between calls would demonstrate that supervisors acknowledge the level of effort involved. Employees who are non-native speakers, such as an Irish native collecting in Spain, a German native collecting in France or the UK, and an Italian native collecting in Germany, experience difficulties in talking to customers who place a higher degree of importance on culture membership over language proficiency. One Irish employee collecting in a non-native language expressed a desire to be compensated in some way for her efforts, either financially or by being recognized for the skill in her performance evaluation. A German employee said a simple “thank you” would suffice. A definitive link between a preference toward native speakers and a culture’s alignment toward individualism versus collectivism could not be made.

Employees and supervisors working in the German market perceive that German customers are commonly credit averse, do not like risk or change in general, and prefer to have things explained in detail using logic. The French market employees perceive that French
customers are often very suspicious, an issue that can be exacerbated if a employee with a non-native accent is talking to the customer. French-speaking employees said the French do not like personal questions but will allow employees to be a little less formal and refer to them by first name. Concerns about financial security and privacy can be explained by the alignment of Germany and France with individualism (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 235).

Collectors’ suggestions that the French tend to be suspicious and less than forthcoming may be explained by Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. Uncertainty avoidance describes a culture’s tolerance for ambiguity and whether or not members of that culture feel nervous, stressed, or threatened in situations that are uncertain (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191). The French rank high on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index with a score of 20, indicating they are more often neurotic, anxious, hostile, and vulnerable, rather than trusting or compliant (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 192, 197).

Employees working the UK market are predominantly Irish and perceive that their customers prefer to talk to someone who does not have a foreign accent, which the Irish accent is considered to be by many non-Irish UK customers. UK market employees perceive that it is not polite to ask their customers personal questions or to talk about money, another example of a UK individualistic preference toward privacy and independence (Hofstede, 1983, p. 62). They also suggested that UK customers are more inclined to dispute their balances and be more aggressive in their tone and demeanor toward collectors, especially when dealing with expatriate employees, demonstrating an individualistic tendency toward dominant and confrontational interaction styles to preserve self-face in conflict situations (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 193-194).

Multiple employees collecting in different markets remarked that they are given a high degree of freedom by their supervisors and are often encouraged to adapt their interaction style
to suit customers as needed. In this particular area, employees demonstrated pride in the
organization and the specific role they play in the organization’s success in Collections. Some
examples noted include:

We do it different than other companies. We’re allowed to
be nice. (German employee 1)

[The supervisors] don’t interfere too much. They let us do
what we think is right. There is no one script we have to
follow. There’s a lot of trust. They know us well and they
know that we understand our country well enough so they
trust us to do it. They give us the basic guidelines and
training and the rest is up to us. (German employee 1)

The job only requires a language. The culture you have
to bring or learn as you go. (German employee 2)

Culture-specific reactions to the organization’s performance evaluation and recognition
system.

Within the Collections division, employee performance is measured using a scorecard
that applies a single set of metrics to all employees. Employees on the UK and German teams
are measured within their market and are not compared to other markets. All six markets
supported by the Rest of the World team are compared to each other on the team’s scorecard.
National culture plays a significant role in how employees feel about the scorecard and the
distribution of scorecard information within the department. The table below illustrates the
different nationalities of study participants, their national culture’s alignment toward
individualism or collectivism and the corresponding IC score, and the culture’s primary face-
concern in a conflict situation (similar to the market-specific table provided above).
### Table 1.2 – Employee alignment on the IC dimension and corresponding face concerns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-identified Nationality</th>
<th>IC Dimension Value</th>
<th>Face Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Individualism (67)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Collectivism (25, 17)</td>
<td>Other-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Individualism (70)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>Individualism (89)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Individualism (76)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>Individualism (75)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Dependent Individualism (50)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Individualism (71)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Collectivism (20)&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Other-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Collectivism (39)</td>
<td>Other-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Individualism (60)</td>
<td>Self-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuadorian</td>
<td>Collectivism (8)</td>
<td>Other-face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>d</sup>Based on a combined score for West Africa.


Agents feel that some of the goals established by the scorecard metrics are easier to achieve in certain markets. For example, the Agent Effectiveness score measures cash collected, which employees feel is more challenging in the Italian and Chinese markets. Some employees said they are better able to make contact with customers in certain markets due to differences in
dialing strategies. Employees perceive that the commitment to pay the balance is kept more often in the UK market because of the payment methods available.

Despite cultural, process, and technology variances across the markets, the weighting is the same for each market for each of the metrics. UK employees expressed little to no concern about market specific challenges and their impacts to the scorecard. However, employees from the Rest of the World team commonly expressed a perception that they are ranked lower than they should be on their scorecards because the scoring system does not take into consideration the market differences.

I convince the customer to pay the same way as other employees do, but I can’t get the payment right away on the call because the [Dutch] market doesn’t allow for that. (Belgian employee 2)

Employees stated that the Mission metric in particular can be challenging to meet due to cultural differences, either between the individual and the organization or between the organization and the customer. In order to satisfy the requirements of the Mission metric, employees must ask customers for the specific date, method, and amount they will pay at the end of every call and provide suggestions on how to resolve the negative balance. Employees said:

It’s not my culture to push, but I have to force myself to do this because I am losing points. (Chinese employee 1)

I don’t like asking Germans to borrow money – it’s not their culture. (Italian employee 1)

As noted in Table 1.2, China differs from Italy and Germany in its alignment toward collectivism versus individualism. Challenges with the Mission metric may stem from the Chinese employee’s collectivistic desire to demonstrate respect and preserve other-face and the Italian employee’s desire to respect a German customer’s individualistic right to privacy (Hofstede, 1983, p. 62; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). Employees noted that they
would like to see adjustments made to their scorecard when supporting other markets, providing the following examples:

I helped the Australian market during Chinese New Year and collected a lot of money because that market is easier. I didn’t get any credit for it. (Chinese employee 2)

I lose money when I work the French or UK markets as opposed to my German market because I don’t meet the scorecard goals. (German employee 4)

Cash collected counts for me as an individual, but it doesn’t count toward my team’s goal for the month if I work a different market than my team. (Belgian employee 1)

The scorecard is sent out twice a month to everyone in the department, and employees can see their performance as well as their peers’ performance. This directly results in face concerns for employees depending on their national culture and creates potential for conflict. The following statement from a Chinese employee demonstrates cultural orientation toward other or mutual-face; however, it does not align with an expected collectivistic tendency to attribute poor performance to individual incompetence or a lack of effort (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192).

When [the Chinese employees] are at the bottom, we talk to each other and tell each other it’s not because we’re bad at our jobs. (Chinese employee 3)

Some employees see the department-wide distribution of the scorecard as a basis for competition amongst employees.

Within [the UK] team, we see it as a sort of competition amongst each other and will make comments to each other, saying ‘oh look, I’m ahead of you again’ or things like that. (Irish employee 1)

That employee’s perception demonstrates an individualistic, self-face enhancing strategy to differentiate self from others in the group (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192).
Supervisors discussed their perception of the broad differences in employees’ interpretations of the scorecard, depending on their national culture, providing the following examples:

Irish people are very relaxed about it. They are open to feedback. If they are not doing well they want to figure out what to improve. (Supervisor 1)

Germans are more defensive and will give you excuses about why they did not meet the goals. They will blame me, saying ‘you gave me more to do, it’s not my fault’ or ‘you pulled me off the phones during a peak time and I suffered for it.’ (Supervisor 2)

Italians are very vocal about the differences in the scorecard, but the Chinese aren’t. (Supervisor 3)

Certain aspects of these statements align with employees’ cultural identification with individualism or collectivism or specific face concerns for each of the cultures noted. For example, the perception that Germans employees will respond by placing blame and getting defensive when confronted about their performance is an expected individualistic effort to cite external factors in an effort to save face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). The Chinese would be expected to be less vocal about scorecard differences due to their collectivistic desire to focus on what is best for the group, their belief that being part of a group means there are rules and standards to follow, and to demonstrate respect to the other-face of the organization (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 121; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192).

Managing employee reactions to the scorecard system.

Employees expressed general dissatisfaction about their challenges with the scorecard system, but were quick to point out that they understand the necessity of the scorecard and the
nature of the business makes it hard to strike a balance across the markets. The following comments from employees illustrate this point:

It’s impossible to create a one-size-fits-all, completely fair approach, but they’ve done the best they can. (Belgian employee 2)

The scorecard is the scorecard. You have to have a way to measure performance. (Chinese employee 3)

Their comments highlight the effectiveness of organizational culture in establishing and socializing a shared practice that can be adapted by employees (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 348-349). The organizational culture also reinforces an individualistic belief that values are in fact universal and should apply to everyone, as well as a collectivistic emphasis on organizational membership and what is best for the group (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 235).

Employees also commented that supervisors are aware of the impacts of differences in the markets on employees’ scorecards and have made significant efforts to help employees struggling to meet targets. Employees expressed belief that supervisors are open to learning more about the markets from employees, support staff, and leaders in the department. Supervisors coach employees by providing different ways of saying things to customers in different markets. Employees feel overall that their opinions are being heard, something they place a high value on, and commented that the leadership team seems open to changing the scorecard and collections processes within reason. Comments include:

[Our senior leader] has skip level meetings and listens to us. He takes our input on how we could change the strategy to be more successful in the Chinese market. (Chinese employee 2)

They’re willing to hear our feedback. (Irish employee 3)

As long as I feel like my manager is listening, it’s enough. (Belgian employee 2)
[Our senior leader] sits on the floor with us. He knows what is going on within our teams. (Belgian employee 2)

If I have a question about the French market that [my supervisor] can’t answer, she will ask [a support employee] who is also a native French speaker. (French employee 2)

I had a question about the German market and [our trainer] didn’t know the answer right away, so she went and asked one of the German supervisors for me. (British employee 1)

Supervisors discussed a shared awareness that the scorecard is not universally fair to all employees across the different markets. For example:

The Germans accept the scorecard for performance evaluation because it’s work-related and it’s a [company] structure. If they’re not performing, they’re more inclined to pick it up. They view it as a reflection on them personally. (Supervisor 2)

For [the Rest of the World] team, it is very difficult because they are all mixed and we are ranking with the same measures in different markets where they don’t have the same possibilities. I know this is a hot issue for my team and I cannot agree completely with this in front of them or it will explode. We have changed the scorecard a lot, but my team still views it as unfair. (Supervisor 3)

Each market has one metric they’re really good in and less in others. When the Chinese employees collect in Australia or the UK, they are very successful. (Supervisor 3)

There was some disagreement amongst the supervisors as to whether or not these were cultural or personality differences. Culture certainly influences certain aspects of personality and the two are not independent (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 40). However, there can be a significant range of personalities within a culture, and linking the two in a context of absolutes can lead to stereotyping (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 40).

Supervisors agreed that it is important to find out what works for each individual on the team, but perceive that is a general approach to managing a team and not something they do
because of the cultural diversity. A non-native German market supervisor expressed the perception that it is necessary to approach German employees one-on-one to give recognition and ask permission to share the recognition publicly unless the team has already agreed as a whole there are certain things that can always be shared with the group. The Rest of the World supervisor agreed it is important to discuss performance and recognition with each employee individually rather than in front of the group, unless the individual explicitly allows the information to be shared. Their approach indicates cultural sensitivity to face concerns, despite their expressed belief that it is driven by personal style of management. Deference to one-on-one conversations is appropriate when dealing with individualistic cultures and employees who place greater importance on self-face if the topic of the discussion is critique or constructive criticism, such as a performance evaluation, but is not necessary when giving compliments (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). The supervisors’ perception that Germans prefer one-on-one recognition aligns more closely with an individualistic desire to be evaluated based on skill and rules only and belief that everyone on the team should be treated the same (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 124). However, for the Rest of the World supervisor, one-on-one conversations may be necessary when dealing with collectivistic Chinese employees, even when giving recognition. Chinese collectivistic culture motivates employees to work toward a team goal anonymously, attributing success to the team effort to give other-face and avoid enhancing self-face (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 121; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 193).
Promoting inclusivity and minimizing conflict through organizational culture and intercultural communication competence.

*Organizational culture membership provides guidelines.*

The organization communicates its culture and expectations to candidates from the onset through the job posting and the interview process. Supervisors reiterated the organization’s commitment in this area, stating:

> When the jobs were posted, the second language expectation was included, so it’s no surprise when you come in and see different cultures and hear different languages being spoken. (Supervisor 5)

> I will try to ask questions indirectly during the interview, to see if the person has a multicultural background or if they are open to mixing with others. (Supervisor 6)

> The interview process weeds out the people that aren’t a right fit for the company, that are less culturally aware. (Supervisor 5)

This process of careful selection of candidates and socialization of the norms of the organizational culture serve to both establish and maintain the organizational culture (Schneider, 1988, p. 239). Employees who join this organization understand that there are certain expectations for how employees will behave toward each other, and expressed belief that individuals considering employment with this multinational company must understand certain things:

> [Candidates] have to be a fit for the values to work here because there are so many different people. (Irish employee 3)

> It’s the nature of the business. [The company] is multicultural with a European head office, so it’s to be expected that you’re going to be working with a variety of Europeans. (Supervisor 2)

> People don’t expect to come here and find things the same
as home – that’s why they left, that’s why they travel – to have different experiences. (German employee 1)

Members of the organization feel they are treated as equals, that people are friendly, respectful of other cultures, and curious to learn about each other’s cultures, which builds loyalty toward the organization. The culture creates an environment of openness and respect that allows diversity to exist without employees feeling the need to hide it or apologize for it.

That’s the reward the company gives – the opportunity to express my views, right or wrong and I won’t be frowned upon for it. (Irish employee 3)

It’s ok to make a mistake here and they don’t make me feel bad about it, compared to where I worked before. (Italian employee 1)

[The company] does a good job with the culture. I have not seen any conflict or heard about it happening to anyone else, so whatever they are doing is working. (British employee 1)

Employees consistently expressed the perception that the organization unites its many different cultures:

We’re all expats here – it gives us a common ground. (German employee 1)

We’re all [members of the same organization]. We help each other and there’s a sense of belonging. (German employee 1)

It’s very comfortable. We’re one big family. (French employee 2)

Here everyone is a foreigner – especially in my team. (Chinese employee 3)

It takes a special kind of person to go work in a foreign country. That contributes to the atmosphere. (German employee 1)
Employees routinely cited open and honest dialogue as a key ingredient to the success of the organizational culture. One employee said:

The organization’s principles are open, honest, and human. Those principles drew me to the organization and are what made me want to work here. (Irish employee 3)

Employees perceive that cultural differences provide an opportunity to learn and expand one’s own understanding, stating:

The differences and challenges teach you empathy, which is also helpful when dealing with customers. (Belgian employee 1)

Before I joined [this company] I never thought my [Chinese] language was useful. Now I’m called on to translate emails. (Chinese employee 1)

It gives me a chance to practice my German skills and learn more about German culture. (Italian employee 1)

Employees can learn from each other and grow their skills to move on to other roles within the [global] organization. (Chinese employee 1)

Employees and supervisors demonstrated their ability to recognize difference as a fundamental aspect of human interaction and being and that personal growth and change only occur through interactions with others who are different from one’s self (Baxter, 2006, pp. 102, 104).

Within the organization, cross-cultural communication is encouraged, by seating employees from different cultures together and inviting employees to company-sponsored events to get to know each other. Employees are allowed to display cultural artifacts, such as flags and religious decorations. Employees often share their culture with each other through food, and the company cafeteria serves food from different cultures on a daily basis. Accommodations are made for individuals with special religious needs, such as multiple breaks during the day for prayer time and avoiding certain foods at team events during religious holidays. Employees can
often be heard speaking their own languages with each other and customers. However, they acknowledge that the primary language of the organization is English, which they agree helps everyone communicate with each other on a basic level when individual primary languages differ.

**Interactions among employees.**

Employees in this organization are frequently expected to use intercultural communication skills to interact with each other. The UK and German teams are co-located based on the markets they support, but there is diversity within the teams coming from non-native English-speaking expatriates and non-native German speakers from Iraq, Italy, and other countries. The Rest of the World team supports the French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and Australian markets, and the cultural mix of the team is more pronounced as a result. Two of the German teams, one of the UK teams, and the Rest of the World team are all led by supervisors whose national culture differs from the majority of their team members.

There is a noticeable separation among nationalities and people do not mix much with other cultures outside of their work teams. This behavior can be explained by Kim’s stress-adaptation-growth dynamic, where the stress brought about by constant intercultural interaction and the requirement to speak English as the lingua franca in the organization can cause people to seek out and spend time with members of their native culture (Kim, 2009, p. 442). Employees can often be found grouped by cultures in the company cafeteria, speaking their native language with each other. Employees noted both positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon:

People find a community within their culture across departments. It gives them a chance to converse in their mother tongue with people who share the same culture. It’s probably almost a relief in some aspects. (Supervisor 3)

Occasionally, you will have a group of people speaking their
same language in the canteen and they don’t adjust to English when someone else who doesn’t speak their language comes to the table. (Irish employee 1)

Awareness of cultural differences causes employees to be more cautious in interactions, and intercultural interactions are not always successful despite best intentions. Employees cited the following examples:

When you open your mouth without thinking about what you say, things can go wrong. Other people could hear it and take it wrong. (Russian employee 1)

Conflict can happen when you don’t know each other well or understand a different sense of humor or way of speaking. (German employee 3)

What one culture considers normal or harmless could really offend someone else, even if that wasn’t the intention of the speaker. It can be very difficult to overcome these types of issues. (Belgian employee 2)

Employees also mentioned that there is sometimes tension within and across the national cultures present in the Collections division. Humor was cited as a particular style of communication that does not always translate well. Several Irish employees noted that humor and joking is very common in Irish culture, yet their jokes or sarcastic humor are not always well received by other cultures, specifically the Germans. The use of English as a common language was cited as having the potential to suppress the ideas of people who lack strong capabilities in the language, by preventing them from feeling comfortable speaking up in meetings conducted exclusively in English. Awareness of these issues demonstrates a level of intercultural competence, as each person strives to make a conscious decision about how to communicate in different situations (Kim, 2009, pp. 444-445). Continued intercultural experiences, whether successful or dissonant, will serve to sharpen employees’ skills and further develop their intercultural communication competence (Kim, 2009, pp. 444-445).
Supervisors managing multiple or different cultures.

Each supervisor is responsible for managing a team where at least some (if not all) of the employees’ national cultures differ from the supervisor’s. Supervisors stated they try to maintain awareness of the varying points of view and preferences of different national cultures. The supervisor’s cited different approaches to dealing with cultural differences and making accommodations for them. Some adapt their management style or communication approach depending on the cultural makeup of the team or the specific situation:

Germans are very time-focused, while others are more relaxed. I [as a German supervisor] know that I have to manage an Iraqi person versus an Indian person very differently, for example. (Supervisor 4)

I have a Muslim person on my team and his religion requires him to pray five times a day. We came together and worked out a plan for him to do this that doesn’t interfere with his schedule or ability to be on the phones. So far this has not been an issue with other members of the team, and hopefully it won’t be. (Supervisor 5)

However, in other cases supervisors cited the need to manage the cultural diversity by consistently enforcing the guidelines of the organization, stating there is less room for accommodation for culturally diverse preferences when employees are being asked to support a business need. For example:

The task that we’re working is a defined task, so we need people fit to work that task. It’s not as if you were building a house and you got 10 different nationalities to build it, they’re all going to lay the bricks differently. They will still lay the bricks the same way. So all of our guys, no matter what nationality, they are working to collect money and give a good customer experience. So that’s what they are trained to do. The training doesn’t give 10 different culture ways to answer the call. The training is set and specified and that’s what we expect them to do and I think they know that. So that’s what we’re actually managing – that they’re doing the task as we expect them to do. We might
make exceptions for personality and culture differences in some cases but it’s never an excuse for not doing the job. (Supervisor 5)

Yes, you do have people that have different cultures and personalities and things like that, but at the end of the day it all comes under one umbrella and that umbrella is that they’re there to do a certain job and you want it done a certain way. You may have someone who’s got a fiery temper and that’s fine they can have a fiery temper but whenever they’re in their work they do what you expect them to do. You’re the manager. You can’t have people flying off the handle and say ‘oh, it’s because I’m Spanish and I’ve got a fiery temper.’ No, I’m sorry, that’s not gonna be good enough. That’s not the kind of behavior I expect of people. You can allow for a bit of it, but you can’t allow it to overtake the main objective, and the main objective at the end of the day is you’re there to do a job. (Supervisor 1)

With the German team, the culture is ‘I’m German and in Germany we do it this way.’ My response to that is, ‘well, you’re in [this organization] and you’re in Dublin. You’re employed to do a job and that’s the job description.’ (Supervisor 2)

The German supervisor was out for the day. The lead for the German team asked the employees to temporarily support the UK market and they said no. I knew it was only about 60% of the team that was saying no, but I approached the entire team in a team huddle in order to stop the behavior. I very directly told them they need to be part of the team and support the business. I explained it is a requirement, and told them they were not demonstrating [the organization’s] behaviors. My direction was perceived as a threat by some of the employees. One even wanted to take me to Human Resources. (Supervisor 3)

These comments again demonstrate the potential for conflict that can arise if supervisors rely to heavily on a one-size-fits-all management approach, especially if this approach is used as an excuse to avoid acknowledging cultural differences or to cease development of intercultural competence (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 308; Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 122). Supervisors need to
manage with a constant awareness toward culture variations in order to avoid escalated issues, dissatisfaction, and employee complaints (Lauring, 2011, pp. 247-248; Lowenstein & Glenville, 1995, pp. 205-206; Roper, 2011, p. 76; Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 140).

Supervisors noted that competition is frequently used as a way to motivate employees to improve or increase performance, a tactic that may not translate well across cultures. In some cases, employees are given a goal to strive for and are rewarded with public recognition and prizes. In other cases, simply sharing the performance of each member of a team on a white board or via an email is used to incent higher performance from employees who are not on track to meet their goals for the month. Supervisors noted challenges involved in using this tactic and expressed different views and opinions in this area:

When I managed the UK team, they loved the competition and seeing their stats on the white board. A Spanish team wouldn’t like everyone seeing their stats and wouldn’t like the competition. They prefer working together toward a team target. (Supervisor 6)

One German supervisor was sending out emails to other German market teams that displayed performance statistics of all the employees across the markets. It became a friendly competition turned bad. Some employees said ‘this is not friendly and we don’t like it.’ (Supervisor 2)

If [the UK employees] see they are under performing [compared to other UK employees] that should drive them, but they seem to have gone backwards. (Supervisor 1)

[The emails] weren’t presented as ‘we’re better than you’ but were just presenting facts. I think it’s nice to have competition but maybe I need to be more careful. (Supervisor 5)

My guys [in Dundalk] have never seen the Dublin target, and that’s the way it should be. I ask [my lead] not to put cash reports on the huddle notes [when they are distributed to the employees]. That’s for us to worry about as managers. (Supervisor 1)
Reactions toward competition could be expected to vary this way, according to each employee’s cultural identification with individualism versus collectivism. The individualistic employees (German, British, and Irish) will see positive results as a compliment or form of face recognition, but would tend to justify poor performance with excuses that have nothing to do with the individual to fend off the perceived personal attack on face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). The collectivistic (Chinese, Nigerian, Russian) employees and the dependent-individualistic (Spanish) employees would typically downplay individual success in favor of group achievement, and would perceive poor performance as an embarrassing loss of face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 190, 192).

Discussion

The overarching goals of this exploratory study were to: determine the effectiveness of the organization’s culture in facilitating the management of diversity and intercultural interactions; highlight the benefits of conducting research within multinational organizations; and generate further understanding of the influence of national and organizational cultures on communication, accommodation, and recognition in a multinational organization. The following discussion situates the findings within the context of the research questions and provides answers to the questions obtained through the study. The literature and theory previously reviewed is incorporated where appropriate to explain the answers.

RQ1: How equitable is the recognition for the culturally specific skill sets present in the call center?

Cultural knowledge informs customer interactions and significantly influences the customer experience for the Collections division. Employees demonstrated awareness of cultural differences amongst customers; in terms of attitudes toward the products and services the
company offers and expectations about service interactions. They do not expect supervisors to understand all of the nuances involved in servicing the different markets, because supervisors do not interact with the customers as frequently or at all in some markets. However, employees feel supervisors understand the cultural differences they are aware of and are open to learning more about the different markets in order to help employees succeed.

Employees and supervisors feel that culture specific skills are noticed and recognized appropriately within the organization in the majority of day-to-day interactions. Employees feel appreciated for their language skills and view requests to help other markets as a form of recognition for their skills. Employees and supervisors acknowledged that culture-specific skills provide opportunities for advancement within the Collections division and the broader organization.

Supervisors strive to manage the teams as “collections of individuals” when possible, recognizing the benefits of integrating employees’ national cultures into business interactions with customers and allowing employees to make suggestions for improvements and new ways of approaching customers in different markets (Lowenstein & Glenville, 1995, p. 208). Supervisors use dialogue as a means to demonstrate understanding of the differences amongst the employees and build intercultural competence, allowing them to establish effective relationships with their teams and avoid conflict (Ching-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 139; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 95; Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 157). As a result, employees feel trusted and empowered to make certain decisions about how to navigate customer interactions in order to drive success for the business.

Supervisors acknowledge the national culture skill sets for the value they add, but are less accepting when employees cite those same cultural influences as reasons why they are not
meeting performance goals or adhering to organizational expectations. As Roper pointed out, striking the right balance here between accountability to the organization and acknowledging employee diversity is particularly challenging for supervisors in multinational organizations (2011, p. 73).

**RQ2: How well are the labor differences involved in collecting in different countries being recognized?**

Differences between markets are well understood and openly discussed between employees and supervisors. Policies are not always perceived as fixed and rigid, and several policy and process accommodations have been made in the past to adjust to different market cultures. Employees also understand that policy and decision-making in a large, multinational organization occurs at a much higher level than their immediate or senior supervisors and are less inclined to feel frustrated when things do not change right away.

Though there is consensus regarding the level of supervisor awareness of the labor differences, the awareness does not necessarily translate into agents being recognized effectively for successfully dealing with these challenges. This is primarily due to the fact that employees vary in the manner in which they prefer to be recognized. For example, some employees would prefer a financial reward for collecting in a non-native language, while others are satisfied with a simple “thank you” for their efforts. Employees that switch back and forth between markets from one call to the next or at intervals throughout the day would like to receive additional time in between the switching in order to mentally prepare for the differences in the other market. Differences in recognition preference can be linked to individualistic or collectivistic differences in what motivates employees (Hofstede, 1983, pp. 46, 54). Individualistic employees prefer to be rewarded for a having a particular set of skills, for being an individual contributor, and value
financial benefits and advancement (Hofstede, 1983, p. 54). Collectivistic employees perceive good performance as an obligation to the group, and would rather not have the team’s accomplishments attributed to their individual efforts (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 121).

At the supervisor level, there also appears to be some inequity in terms of the labor differences required to manage teams collecting in different markets. Supervisors who manage employees supporting markets from their same culture (as is the case with some of the German and UK teams) are slightly less aware of the cultural differences and challenges involved in collecting in other markets supported by the organization. They are able to provide support for their employees and coach them on market specific nuances with little difficulty. Supervisors managing teams that support multiple markets or markets that differ from the supervisor’s culture face additional challenges enabling their agents to succeed in their respective markets.

Supervisors whose national culture differs from the culture(s) of their subordinates are required to have a high degree of intercultural communication competence (Chiang-Hsiang & Hung-Wen, 2008, p. 139; Griffith & Harvey, 2001, p. 95; Durant & Shepherd, 2009, p. 157). The likelihood that employees’ cultures are aligned differently along Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism dimension than the supervisor’s culture is higher in these situations, increasing the potential for relationship conflict. The supervisor must therefore adjust his or her face negotiation strategy to accommodate the different cultural orientations toward individualism versus collectivism present in the team (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 190-191; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, pp. 602-603). This may be more successful in one-on-one interactions, but is less likely to be successful in a group setting where multiple different face concerns exist.
RQ3: How culturally sensitive is the recognition structure promoted by the organization’s formal performance evaluation system?

The findings indicate that the scorecard system used to measure employee performance presents a substantial challenge to the organization in terms of its commitment to multicultural inclusivity. The use of a single set of metrics to measure performance across such a diverse set of employees results in certain employees routinely finding themselves at the bottom of the scorecard in comparison to their peers. Applying individualistic approaches toward management, such as competition and public discussion of performance and recognition, is a more commonly trained Western organizational approach, but can result in conflicts when dealing with a culturally diverse team (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 122). Chinese employees, for example, would likely perceive competition amongst employees as a violation of their collectivistic belief that everyone should work together for the benefit of the group (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 122). These practices point out areas where further education on the influence of culture may be warranted. There is no universal set of management practices, including those pertaining to performance evaluation and recognition, which can be universally applied across cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 338).

Since most employees feel the scorecard does not accurately reflect the variances in opportunities to collect in different markets, they feel it is a poor reflection on their individual, and in some cases their team’s, performance. This in turn can impact an employee’s sense of credibility or status in the group, creating potential for conflict by negatively impacting the ability of employees and supervisors to maintain face amongst their peers and in employee-supervisor relationships (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 187, 190). The distribution of the scorecard to all employees via email limits opportunities for employees and supervisors to
proactively engage facework to mitigate face concerns. For example, a Chinese collectivistic employee who would perceive poor scorecard performance as a face attack would most likely internalize the negative attack and may never bring his concerns about the scorecard to his supervisor (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 192). Not realizing the Chinese employees’ reaction to the scorecard, the supervisor may never engage the employee to address the negative perceptions created by the scorecard. As a result, the relationship between supervisor and employee and the employee’s perception of the organization would be damaged (Conrad & Poole, 2005, pp. 154, 178; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 190).

Employees acknowledge the need to measure performance and supervisors have worked hard to make adjustments based on employee feedback, but they all generally agree that the existing system is flawed. Single market teams typically fare well with the scorecard system, with the exception of employees within those teams who support multiple markets. The employees and supervisor of the mixed Rest of the World team suffer the most disadvantages from the scorecard system, because the six markets supported by the team are all compared together even though the markets are completely different.

To look at all people as being the same might appear to reflect open-mindedness, but in supervisory roles, such an approach can result in overlooking personal characteristics that are essential to the success of individuals, groups, and the organization (Roper, 2011, p. 79).

The organizational culture helps minimize the severity of the issues associated with the scorecard and the differences between the markets. It creates an environment where employees and supervisors can openly discuss the challenges and work together to find ways to solve them and provides a framework for employees to understand the necessity for the common standards of the scorecard and the desire to succeed for the benefit organization (Polat, 2012, p. 1411,
RQ4: How well does the organization demonstrate its core value of honoring diversity to the employees?

Overall, the findings indicate that the organizational culture is strong, and diversity is not simply tolerated but is generally well respected and encouraged with few exceptions. National cultures are represented throughout the organization, yet the organizational culture still functions as a unifying factor that defines how people are supposed to treat each other. Employees and supervisors use a mixture of individual and organizational skills to manage the diversity (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 120). Individual skills include communication, empathy and recognizing limiting points of view and/or prejudices, while the organizational skills include creating an environment where change is allowed and encouraged, policies are fair both in writing and in practice, and cross-cultural communication and team-building is encouraged and supported (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 120).

At the same time, there exists what appears for now to be a healthy tension between respecting diversity and also managing to the needs of the business. If national culture brings something to the table that makes an employee or supervisor successful, it is embraced. Accommodations are made for national cultures when it comes to religious holidays and other culture-specific needs. However, supervisors’ tolerance for cultural diversity wanes when they perceive it is being used as an excuse for failing to meet the goals of the organization. In this manner, the organizational culture may serve in some respects as a mechanism to suppress diversity or at least to make it known when it is acceptable to bring it to the forefront and when it is not. The tenuous balance between organizational and national cultures resulting from
differences in cultural alignment toward individualism versus collectivism was highlighted by a noticeable stigma surrounding German employees and supervisors within the organization, emphasized more so in the supervisor discussions than amongst the employees. Germans were identified as being tougher to deal with, and interactions with the German employees and supervisors were identified as having a higher risk for resulting in conflict.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

The study focused on performance evaluation and recognition structures established by a particular multinational organization and their effectiveness in the organization’s culturally diverse employee environment. The collectors in the organization are responsible for effectively obtaining payments in multiple different markets, using their language skills, as well as cultural understanding of their assigned markets and customers. Employees openly acknowledged that their supervisors have made a concerted effort to recognize the differences among the various markets, but agreed that more could be done. Though the collectors understand the basic premise of the scorecard as a means to measure performance, numerous concerns were presented pertaining to the fairness of the scorecard methodology. The manner in which the scorecard is distributed also raised issues surrounding appropriate recognition strategies for different cultures and the use of competition as a means to incent individual performance across multiple cultures.

Limitations of the Study

As previously mentioned, this was an exploratory study designed to broaden the scope of existing research in intercultural communication and organizational culture and highlight the benefits of conducting more in-depth research in these areas within multinational organizations. As a result of its exploratory nature, the study brought with it certain limitations and challenges. The wording of the research questions themselves may have contributed to some ambiguity in the study. The words “recognition” and “equitable” require more clear definition within the context of this study, in order to provide a clear frame of reference participants can use to evaluate their expectations and whether or not those expectations are being met.

The addition of two critical components would have yielded more detailed results and additional insights: sufficient duration and participant observation. The study only lasted for a
period of two weeks and relied exclusively on feedback from participants in the focus groups, interviews, and surveys to inform the results.

The quality of the results obtained from the interviews and focus groups depended on employees’ ability and desire to accurately recall and describe their interactions and beliefs. People have a tendency to misrepresent certain memories or give guarded or embellished responses in such situations, to further their own agendas, to protect other members of the group, or to avoid being seen in a negative light by their peers (Lauring, 2011, pp. 239-240; Neuman, 2006, p. 443; Sarbaugh, 1984, pp. 74-75). Despite the promise of anonymity and verbal agreement amongst participants not to share the discussions outside of the sessions, participants may have been more likely to censor themselves during the sessions. They may have been suspicious that information would be shared with the organization’s leaders or their direct supervisors, because the researcher is also an employee of the organization (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 66). Disclosure to the researcher may been limited, given the researcher’s membership in the organization, the researcher’s “outsider” status, and the short time the researcher spent with the study participants.

The surveys included in the study were designed to balance some of the challenges brought about by the qualitative methods of the research. However, the survey results added little value to the study and had their own limitations. Specifically, the supervisor survey was administered to a particularly small sample, which meant there was no way of guaranteeing anonymity for the respondents. Additionally, all surveys were administered in American English, which is not the primary language for the respondents. Employees who speak Irish or British English may not have fully understood certain questions or terms used within the survey either, due to cultural differences in dialect and use of the language. The anonymity of
participants was further limited by the makeup of certain teams within the organization. Multiple German and United Kingdom teams exist; however, there is one team comprised of a specific set of mixed nationalities. As a result, it becomes possible to connect some of the feedback received in focus groups and interviews to a specific supervisor and/or group of employees.

The researcher’s direct facilitation of the focus groups and interviews may have also limited the depth of the study results. It is common practice for a researcher to facilitate focus groups and interviews directly; however, engaging an outside resource for a study when possible allows the researcher to focus strictly on observing the sessions and taking notes instead (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 174, 183-184). This allows the researcher to hear more specifically what is said and to observe the nonverbal cues going on in the sessions, instead of missing that valuable context while facilitating (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 174, 183-184).

Further Study or Recommendations

Conducting the study in a true ethnographic fashion using participant observation over an extended period of time, in addition to focus groups and interviews, would have counteracted many of the limitations mentioned above (Byun & Ybema, 2005, pp. 536-538; Lauring, 2011, pp. 239-240). It would have also contributed more in-depth description of interactions and informed a deeper understanding of the impacts of the cultural differences, making participant observation an obvious area for further study (Byun & Ybema, 2005, pp. 536-538; Lauring, 2011, pp. 239-240). Simply broadening the scope of the study methods and increasing the duration could yield very different results.
Hofstede’s research identified other dimensions of culture, including uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity versus femininity, which Ting-Toomey also cited in her exploration of cultural differences in face negotiation (Hofstede, 1983, p. 50; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, pp. 190-191). Exploring the themes uncovered by the study and interactions of the employees within the context of the other cultural dimensions and their implications on behavior, perception and face negotiation would further enhance the study results. Additionally, many of the employees within the organization’s Irish offices have lived in Ireland for a period of three years or more. Acculturation to Irish values and beliefs could play a significant role in changing expatriate employees’ perceptions and expectations over time. The same can be said with regard to organizational culture. The longer employees are a part of a multinational organization and the culture of the subsidiary office’s host nation, the more likely they may be to adapt and let go of certain aspects of their national culture in favor of the local or organizational culture.

The study identified opportunities for the organization to improve performance evaluation methods with regard to the structure and distribution of the employee scorecard. The organization could pilot specific changes in the scorecard methodology and administer follow up surveys or conduct additional research to ascertain the impacts of the changes. At the time the research was completed, the organization was also launching a diversity training initiative that may have a significant impact on interactions amongst employees and between employees and supervisors. Repeating the study six months to a year from now could result in a much different reaction from participants if they believe the organization and its leaders have taken additional steps to acknowledge and understand cultural diversity.
Finally, expanding the scope of the study to include other departments within this specific organization and its other locations around the globe would further test the role and effectiveness of the organization’s culture on managing the differences in employees’ national cultures. The organization consists of a wide variety of cultures and other types of diversity, even within its United States offices. It is worth pointing out that research on multinational organizations tends to focus primarily on companies based in the United States with subsidiary offices located in other countries, when in fact the lessons learned could and should be applied to the American home office as well. Conducting this study in other multinational organizations and comparing the results would also provide a greater understanding of the specific role of organizational and national culture in intercultural interactions.

Conclusions

Employees’ national culture diversity clearly provides specific benefits to a multinational organization, in terms of the organization’s ability to effectively serve its customers and succeed against the competition. The same diversity that provides these benefits also comes with unique challenges for the organization, its employees, and its leaders. While leaders may not be expected to understand all the nuances of each national culture present in the organization, they are expected to effectively build relationships with their diverse teams by encouraging open dialogue about challenges and intercultural communication dissonance. Leaders in multinational organizations must also demonstrate a higher degree of intercultural communication competence than employees and leaders in traditional organizations, in order to minimize the potential for conflict, preserve the uniqueness of national cultures present, and ensure the organization’s culture is not functioning in a way that suppresses individuality or homogenizes differences.
Despite a lack of directed education that might provide valuable tools for effectively managing culturally diverse teams, the supervisors demonstrated a heightened awareness of the influence of national culture on their subordinates’ and, to a certain extent, their own behaviors. Their understanding generally allows them navigate day-to-day interactions with their subordinates with a minimal amount of conflict. Feedback from the employees both reiterated this point and added to themes uncovered in the supervisor focus group regarding areas where supervisors may be less sensitive to cultural differences. Drawing a firm line between an employee’s culture and the organizational culture when it comes to performance expectations and evaluation and using competition as a means to motivate employees are two areas where the supervisors are less apt to be aware of or accept cultural differences in employees’ expectations.

Managing a team of culturally diverse employees and supervisors also requires an understanding of how different cultures approach conflict and how they differ in their beliefs and values. If the organization fails to make an effort to continuously expand its employees’ cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence, the organizational culture will deteriorate over time. Employees will become skeptical of whether or not the organizational culture lives up to its values and will start to feel manipulated by the organization. Supervisors must carefully balance the needs of the organization with the needs and expectations of culturally diverse employees, ensuring that employees are not using cultural differences as an excuse not to meet expectations. Supervisors themselves must also be vigilant in their efforts to avoid using organizational culture as a mechanism to suppress individuality or exploiting the diversity for the benefit of the organization at the expense of the individual (Lewis, French & Phetmany, 2000, p. 107).
All of the employees (supervisors and collectors) who participated in the study demonstrated what might be considered a higher than average level of intercultural communication competence. Employees primarily attributed this to their individual experiences with members of different cultures prior to and since joining the organization. They all expressed gratitude for the opportunity the organization provides to increase their awareness and understanding of other cultures. Employees expressed a firm belief that the organizational culture does much to create a positive environment where people from many different cultures can learn from each other and thrive. They perceive that the organization places a high value on cultural diversity, recognizing it through inclusive group activities, strong hiring practices, and an “open door” policy that allows employees to bring their issues and concerns to leaders for discussion. Employees acknowledged that with all the organization’s efforts so far, it has yet to overcome the tendency of individuals from the same culture to stick together. Though this was not necessarily cited as a negative aspect of the organizational environment, employees remarked there is still opportunity for integration across cultures.

An effective organizational culture will harness the creativity brought to the table by the many different cultures in a multinational organization. A culture based on a key value of respect for diversity will succeed in encouraging dialogue between employees, as long as it guides employees to engage in intercultural interactions with an open mind, a willingness to learn, and a desire to continuously develop their own intercultural communication competence. A multinational organization must constantly evaluate the culture, policies, and processes put into place by the home office, to ensure they are applicable to subsidiary locations and do not run counter to the organization’s values. As this study identified, organizations must particularly
focus on processes and polices surrounding performance evaluation and recognition, as they are most likely to create friction amongst a culturally diverse group of employees and supervisors.

The study calls attention to the critical role that dialogue plays in maintaining relationships, overcoming challenges brought about by differences amongst employees due to their different national cultures, and the importance of an effective organizational culture to minimize or eliminate dissonance in interactions between employees. Open lines of communication between employees and supervisors, including senior leaders, are necessary for the success of an organization. Communication and the creation of constant dialogue leads to greater understanding of differences between self and others, leading to improved quality of relationships (Baxter, 2006, p. 105; Buber, 1958). It provides the ethical framework for how individuals should treat each other, allowing employees and supervisors to feel comfortable expressing their culture-specific values, beliefs and opinions, sharing their identities with each other (Baxter, 2006, pp. 104-105; Buber, 1958). It also lays the foundation for the formation of I-Thou instead of I-It relationships, as employees see the value in other’s cultural differences and trust each other enough to share differing opinions and disclose their personal beliefs (Buber, 1958).

The dialogic approach to communication demonstrated by this organization allows employees and leaders to create new meaning through understanding of different points of view, in order to construct a shared reality within the organization (Baxter, 2006, pp. 104-105). In this manner, the study highlights the organizational function of communication itself and demonstrates the level of commitment required from employees and supervisors within an organization, both as members of the organization and as creators of the organizational experience for everyone involved (Taylor, 2006, p. 140). Despite the challenges presented by
the many different national cultures present in the organization, the supervisors demonstrate the value of taking a dialogic instead of directive approach to communication, allowing the differences to shine through and add value and strength to the organization. Employees have also demonstrated the personal responsibility they feel to effectively communicate with employees and supervisors from different national cultures, for the benefit of the organization and their own personal growth.

Despite the limitations inherent in the structure and scope of the study, the results are actionable for the specific organization studied. The study also served its purpose in identifying several opportunities for further research. A significant goal of the study was achieved, by demonstrating the value and importance of conducting additional research on the influence of national and organizational culture on intercultural communication in multinational organizations. Continuing to expand this body of research by augmenting this study or conducting other studies like it will create a knowledge base that multinational organizations can leverage to minimize conflict and improve employee satisfaction, in order to maximize organizational effectiveness.
References


