

Workshop title: Cultural aspects in (online) communities of practice: how to deal with them?

Description

The workshop was introduced by a short presentation on how different cultural backgrounds affect (online) collaboration. The workshop then started with two short presentations:

- Language and Cultural Barriers in International Cooperation (Corinna Flöck, CRSA-ECP, France)
- Setting up Communities of Practice for Innovative Russian SMEs (Johann Riedel, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom)

The discussion focussed on practical experiences of the two presenters and the participating conference attendees: what main cultural aspects have you observed? What were your lessons learned? What are your recommendations for other communities?

The workshop ended with the validation of four challenging statements presented at the beginning.

Lessons learned

Moderation

- 1) Rules and guidelines are important to foster trust, as is a competent moderator.
- 2) The role of the moderator in intercultural communities is crucial.

Technology

- 1) Technology does not show facial expressions etc.: may make communication between cultures more difficult (you don't immediately see reactions to what you said).
- 2) On the other hand: chat e.g. does not reveal the age, background, position of people => Technology could also be a means to bridge differences.
- 3) Other comment: online discussions e.g. in chats, eventually reveal aspects such as age, character and cultural background (it simply takes time for these aspects to emerge).
- 4) Groups in online discussions are often smaller than in face-to-face events: this could minimise cultural problems.
- 5) Technology should fit our purposes, not vice versa: choose the technology so that it can help to bridge cultural diff.
- 6) In some cultures (as Russia), the phone is more common than emails => people just prefer using one technology to another.

Language

- 1) People who are weak in the overall community language prefer chat to phone (they chat even if their English is weak as this gives them time to formulate their statements)
- 2) Language zones are especially important for beginners.

General statements on the impact of cultural differences

- 1) Differences in education, experiences etc. (cognitive distances) have a stronger impact than cultural differences. When cognitive differences are small, cultural differences disappear: there is a link between these two aspects.
- 2) Differences in age and level of ICT experience matter as much as cultural differences.
- 3) Political background is also an important aspect: people from (former) communist countries such as China and Russia are not used to open knowledge sharing. Aspects of hierarchy are much more important than in Western European countries.
- 4) Geographical diversity is also an important factor: there are huge differences in collaboration practices and abilities between people from urban and people from rural areas in some countries.
- 4) Prejudices have to be addressed: most people don't even realise, how biased their statements are.
- 5) Sensitivity is important to deal with intercultural differences.
- 6) Some words even have a different meaning in different cultures: in Russia e.g. the word "collaboration" has a negative connotation.

Challenging statements

- 1) "The concept of CoPs works best with people from similar cultural backgrounds."
=> Other factors such as cognitive distances, geographical distances, etc. may have an even stronger impact.
- 2) "Culture impacts the choice of technology."
=> We should think about which technology to use for a certain community. Culture can help to bridge cultural differences as it reveals factors apparent in face-to-face events (age, position, etc.). This however may even be a danger in intercultural communities, as people are then less aware of, and thus less careful of, the background of others.
Which technology people prefer using may differ between cultures.
- 3) "Language is the main barrier to intercultural communities."
=> Other aspects such as differences in collaboration practices, different meanings of words, etc. may even have a stronger impact.
Language problems have to be taken into account when designing community spaces (language zones, chat instead of phone).

4) "Intercultural differences call for intercultural competences of moderators."
=> The role of the moderator in intercultural communities is a crucial one: he/she should observe conversations, give advice and try to be a mediator between cultures. However, the challenge of different cultures also affects the role of participants. They themselves also need a good deal of sensitivity and awareness of participants' prejudices (including their own) to be prepared for collaborating with people from a different background.