Edward Hall and Culture

It is a well-established fact that people from different cultures behave and think differently. Hall (1976) says, "...the natural act of thinking is greatly modified by culture..." (p. 7). In other words, people grow up immersed in social systems, values, and attitudes often at odds with those of people from other cultures. This immersion affects how individuals think about things as well as how they interact with each other. Hall goes on to say:

Culture is man's medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, how their cities are planned and laid out, how transportation systems function and are organized, as well as how economic and government systems are put together and function. (p. 14)

These cultural differences not only affect how individuals must interact with each other on a personal level but also how they must interact in a business setting. This becomes particularly relevant in a field like technical writing, where many of the projects are collaborative and increasingly international and e-collaborative in nature.

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A study of the issues in technical writing e-collaboration and methods to enhance collaborative cooperation with a focus on global collaboration

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Methods

In this pilot study, I used a brief surveymonkey.com survey which I posted on technicalwritingworld.com and a tech writing listserv. It contained the following questions:

Background Information

1. What is your current job title?

2. What does your current job entail (in general)?

General E-Collaboration

1. How much of your job involve collaboration?

2. Of the time you spend collaborating, how much of it is spent e-collaborating?

3. What technologies do you use to e-collaborate?

Global Collaboration

1. As part of your job, do you collaborate with international teams?

2. What form does this collaboration usually take?

3. What issues come up due to cultural differences?

4. How do you handle these issues?

5. What do you think would have been useful knowing before you had to handle these issues?

Results

Eleven people responded, all of whom had some sort of "technical writing" in their job title and most of whom had some sort of global e-collaboration as part of their jobs. Their responses were as follows:

- Respondents believed that time zone and cultural attitude differences were the biggest cultural issues in their jobs, particularly where deadline expectations come in.

- Respondents recommended being as explicit as possible with expectations in order to avoid these issues.

- Only one mentioned having formal training provided to them by their employer on how to deal with culture clash issues.

Conclusions

Few of the studies directly addressed global collaborative issues. Fewer still proposed any systematic solution.

According to my pilot study, many of the issues the participants experienced had either to do with a mismatch of business culture expectations or technological or temporal issues such as coordinating schedules and the like. While the latter set of issues could be resolved largely using traditional e-collaboration strategies, the clash of cultural expectations is more complicated.

Hall states that people operate under the implicit assumption that all other cultures think and behave the way their culture does; only having had exposure to other cultures and observing other individuals struggle with adjusting to foreign cultural nuances did he himself become aware that there were different cultural systems (1976, p. 39). In other words, without either some sort of training to give people that awareness or having some sort of intercultural exposure, technical writers would most likely not be properly equipped to smoothly deal with the sorts of issues that arise through culture clashes. Technical writers working with global e-collaborative teams need to first become aware of the root of the culture clashes before they would be able to properly deal with them in order to carry on with their projects.

Areas of Future Research

Some potential future areas of study:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of existing technical communicator employer-provided training programs

- Developing a set of qualities defining effective international technical writing e-collaboration training programs

Ideally, these training programs would be individualized for specific companies, dealing only with those countries the company deals with. This would allow the technical communicators to avoid the majority of the pitfalls commonly associated with international e-collaboration without being bogged down with trying to learn too many cultural nuances at once. These training programs would likely save companies and organizations both time and money and allow technical communicators to focus more on their projects with fewer culture-clash inspired issues. At this time, however, this topic has yet to be fully explored.