

What is particular  
about french culture  
compared to german  
culture?



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What is particular about French culture compared to German culture? As a result, what conflicts could arise in business communication between these two cultures? Outline 1. Introductory Comments2 2. The Theory of Edward T. Hall3 a. Time: Polychronic versus Monochronic3 b. Context: High-Context versus Low-Context4 c. Space5 d. Information Flow6 e. Interfacing6 3. The Dimensions of Geert Hofstede7 a. Power Distance Index7 b. Individualism Index8 c. Masculinity Index8 d. Uncertainty Avoidance Index8 e. Long Term Orientation Index9 4. Final Remarks10 1. Introductory Comments

In our ever-growing world of international and global business, intercultural business communication is becoming more and more important to everybody acting on an international basis, either with colleagues from foreign branches or with clients who are based all over the world. So, what is actually meant by the term of intercultural business communication? It refers to the concourse of business individuals having different social, ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds. One can see that it not only happens when people from different countries meet and that the importance of effective communication can hardly be overstated.

As Trudy Milburn, professor at CSUCI (California State University Channel Islands), stated in her article in Management Review, communication serves not only as an expression of cultural background, but also as a shaper of cultural identity. And not only is the verbal communication important in business communication. 60-70 % of our communication happens on a non-verbal basis. It starts with different perceptions of time, and goes over to how people listen, or different perceptions of personal space, etc. During the

twentieth century, world economies, especially in Europe after World War II kept growing together more and more.

Especially Germany and France have a long history not only with very important political relationships but also business relationships, for example with franco-german companies like EADS or Airbus. And although those countries are direct neighbors, there are still many differences in their respective cultures. This work will have a look into the cultures of French and German, and what conflicts could arise in business communication, with the help of the studies done by Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede. 2. The Theory of Edward T. Hall One of those abovementioned researchers was the American anthropologist Edward T.

Hall (1914-2009). Mr Hall lived among the Native American people of the Navajo and also in different countries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. He published several books on intercultural communication in which he provides five keys to successful intercultural communication. The five keys are Time, Context, Space, Information Flow and Interfacing and shall be described on the example of Germany and France. a. Time: Polychronic versus Monochronic According to Mr. Hall's research there exist two different perceptions of time in cultures. There are polychronic and monochronic cultures.

In monochronic cultures, time is perceived as linear - comparable to a road extending from the past into the future. Monochronic time means paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Monochronic cultures perceive time as almost tangible, as they talk about it as something that can

be lost, spent or saved. People from monochronic cultures don't like to be interrupted and prefer to work in closed and quiet offices and are committed to their job. This seals people off from each other, which, as a result, shortens most of their relationships and allows intensifying only few.

When referring to the concept of monochronic cultures, Mr. Hall also states that interpersonal relationships are subordinate to the present schedule. Also, the work time is clearly separable from one's personal time. On the other hand, there are the polychronic cultures that perceive time not as a line but more as a single point. Polychronic time is perceived much less tangible. The concept of polychronic cultures is more or less the antithesis of the monochronic time system. There is a much bigger tendency to build life-long relationships.

People are much more distractible and don't feel stressed when being interrupted. In polychronic cultures it is also much more common to do many things at once. Privacy is not that important as are relatives, friends or close colleagues. " Polychronic people feel that private space disrupts the flow of information by shutting people off from one another (...)", i. e. why offices in polychronic cultures are mostly very open and people don't hide behind closed doors. According to the research of Mr. Hall Germans are very high on the monochronic scale, which stands in total contrast to the very polychronic French culture.

For most Germans this means businesswise: "[...] Once a decision is made they stand firmly and unalterably behind it. " On the opposite, there are the French, who think nothing of changing plans last minute, which can be very

unsettling for “[...] Germans, who consider such behavior irresponsible. ” As a result, business relationships can get very tough, if the business partners don’t consider this kind of differences. b. Context: High-Context versus Low-Context Mr. Hall’s second classification for cultures are high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures are mostly also polychronic cultures.

The style of communication is less verbally and less explicit than in low-context cultures. Information flows freely and people don’t expect to be given information but to get the information they need themselves.

Decisions are based on face-to-face relationships, which are often based around an authority person in the center. In low-context culture the communication is much more explicit. Low-context cultures are much more rule-oriented than high-context culture and information is codified. Decisions are mostly focused on what needs to be done, rather than on personal relationships.

Like Mr. Hall said in 1976: “ A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i. e. , the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation. Being a high-context culture, French often get frustrated by the low-context Germans.

Everything is being discussed in detail by the Germans, who need

background information in many aspects of their day-to-day life. “ This <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-particular-about-french-culture-compared-to-german-culture/>

difference can affect virtually every situation and every relationship in which members of these two opposite traditions find themselves. ” c. Space According to Mr. Hall’s research monochronic time cultures, like the German culture, emphasize the compartmentalization of functions and people, that’s why offices are mostly private and soundproof “[...] to seal themselves off from others in order to concentrate on their work. “ The French [...],” on the other hand, “[...] have a close personal distance and are not as territorial. They are tied to people and thrive on constant interaction and high-information flow to provide them the context they need. ” In business relationships with Germans and French this could lead to major misunderstandings, as the German would feel constantly interrupted by the French, who is constantly transmitting information and seeking for information. d. Information Flow Information is handled differently in polychronic cultures, like France, and monochronic cultures, like Germany. In polychronic cultures [...] information flows freely within the peer group, moving rapidly as if it had a life on its own, but is very restricted between groups. In monochronic cultures [...] information flows slowly, delayed by rigid compartmentalization. ” Businesswise, this means, the French have a large network of colleagues and clients to keep themselves informed, as everybody could hold valuable information. e. Interfacing In order to bring together all these different factors which constitute the cultures according to Mr. Hall, the last key is the interface between cultures. The greater the cultural difference in such things as time, context, and space, the more difficult the interface will be. ” There are five basics in cultural interfacing which both Germans and French should keep in mind when dealing with each other. The five principles are: “ 1. The higher the context of [...] the culture,

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the more difficult the interface; 2. The greater the complexity of the elements, the more difficult the interface; 3. The greater the cultural distance, the more difficult the interface; 4. The greater the number of levels in the system, the more difficult the interface; 5.

Very simple, low-context, highly evolved, mechanical systems tend to produce fewer interface problems than multiple-level systems of great complexity that depend on human talent for their success. ” 3. The

Dimensions of Geert Hofstede The second well-known researcher in the area of intercultural communication is Mr. Geert Hofstede from the Netherlands. , who is also an anthropologist as well as a psychologist. In the early 1970's Mr. Hofstede did a worldwide research for IBM on people's behavior in large organizations and how they collaborate. During a two-year sabbatical he evaluated the data he had gathered.

Out of this data, Mr. Hofstede created the concept of the first four cultural dimensions. In the 1990's he added the fifth dimension. These dimensions reflect problem areas that different national societies handle differently. The following results for Germany and France have been taken from the book “ Cultures and Organizations - Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. ” by Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. a. Power Distance Index “ This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance

accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power. " With an index of 68 (the highest being 104), France has a rather high Power Distance, meaning that hierarchies are accepted and don't need to be justified. On the contrary, Germany has a rather low index of 35 (the lowest being 11).

This means that Germans expect the equal distribution of power. In business this could lead to conflicts, as Germans could get irritated by this kind of hierarchy system. b. Individualism Index " The high side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of " I" or " we. " In this case, Germany and France have very close indices with 67 for Germany and 71 for France. The highest result is 91 (USA). This reflects the high focus on individual freedom and personal rights. c. Masculinity Index " The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life.

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Society at large is more consensus-oriented. " The index for Germany in this case is 66 and for France 43. Germany rather has tendencies to a more masculine dimension and France tends to a more feminine dimension. The difference of the two countries can be seen in the, for Germans rather irritating, ' savoir-vivre' lifestyle. The French are very proud for their food specialties and their world-known wines and champagnes. Germans get confused when business lunches sometimes take up to two hours with the French, as they enjoy this time with informal discussion over good food.

Germans, on the other hand, have tendencies to competition and materialism, which the French don't. d. Uncertainty Avoidance Index " The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas.

Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles. " In this case France has a higher index, with 86, in comparison to Germany with only 65. For the business situation this could be interpreted, that Germans have their plan they stick to and they know what is going to happen. The French on the other side don't have these strict plans and always have in mind that anything can happen. e. Long Term Orientation Index " The long-term orientation dimension can be interpreted as dealing with society's search for virtue.

Societies with a short-term orientation generally have a strong concern with establishing the absolute Truth. They are normative in their thinking. They exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. In societies with a long-term orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results. ”

Germany also has a relatively high rating with 83 points. This reflects the high focus of Germany on the future. In German business everything is planned for a goal to achieve in the future. And long term planning in German companies can easily be ten or more years. Whereas France’s index is lower (63 points). This shows that the French don’t have the focus on the future, they live here and now and the future is not that important. 4. Final Remarks Having lived in France myself, a lot of what Hall and Hofstede have found out I can approve. But as the researches of Edward T.

Hall and Geert Hofstede have been conducted already some years ago it is questionable if all these results are still valid as the countries and cultures worldwide have more and more contact and also the fluctuation of people from one country to another is speeding up. So, in business situations with Germans and French, these theories and dimensions can be a first advice but they are not to be seen as given facts rather as a guideline for avoiding conflicts in business situations, as cultures and societies are under constant change. Bibliography 1. Engleberg, Isa. “ Working in Groups: Communication Principles and Strategies.

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