Sara Batts, Jas Breslin and Susanna Winter

Biography

Jas Breslin is Regional Information Resources Manager at Morrison & Foerster (UK) LLP, responsible for library resources in the London and Brussels offices, and has worked there since 2005. Jas is the current BIALL President-Elect, and is also active in the BIALL US Law Librarians group and the BIALL Solos & Small Teams group. She sits on the City Legal Information Group Committee, and is also a co-manager of the Lis-Law listserv.

Communication, Culture and Context: Best Practice for Working Internationally

Abstract: A job with a global law firm can involve meeting or working alongside colleagues from many different countries. In order to communicate effectively, we need to be aware of the different norms within which we work. Sara Batts, Jas Breslin and Susanna Winter, who together have many years' experience working internationally, discuss three key areas which can help enhance our interactions with our counterparts overseas.
Keywords: international law firms; global law firms; communication

COMMUNICATION

Ease <> effectiveness

Communication for the global law firm ought to be easy. Life in the 21st century gives us a bewildering array of choices of how to get in touch with other people fast. In the age of tablets and smart phones we can text, instant message, email, tweet, Facebook or even, actually speak to colleagues the other side of the world almost instantaneously. However, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of assuming that just because you have used the simplest, fastest method of communicating, you have got a clear message across to your colleague in Malaysia. Just because a message is quick and easy to produce, it does not mean that it will be understood in the way that you want it to be, particularly when working across borders and contending with language and cultural differences.

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Method influences meaning

Communication is multi-dimensional – when you are speaking in a meeting, your words, grammatical structures, intonation, expressions, idiom, posture, gestures, and facial expressions all combine to convey your message. Communicating with colleagues in overseas offices means that you have to do without several of these dimensions, and each dimension you remove increases the risk of a misunderstanding. It may be straightforward enough to get across simple requests and pieces of information, but more complex discussions can be lost.

Faced with these barriers, how do we build a community of communicating informational professionals in the global firm? Which of the many tools available to us should we choose? Wikis, email address lists, Twitter, discussion groups, conference calls; the list is endless. We

all have our preferred method of communication, but it is important to stop and think carefully before imposing it on a group of colleagues in other offices. While some individuals will always respond to us, there is often an even larger group on the sidelines of the discussion, unwilling to enter it and express their views because of language issues or concern about public exposure. When sending any message or beginning any discussion of this sort, it is vital to consider not just the communication method that is most comfortable to you, but the communication needs of those you are addressing. These will depend on such factors as the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, the likely difference in understanding and background of the communication parties, and the nature and length of the relationship. If it is important that all your overseas colleagues read your message quickly, a group email might be the most appropriate method. If you are building a new relationship with offshore colleagues, or need to have a difficult conversation where seeing the facial expressions of others would help, a videoconference might be more appropriate. A telephone call will often be an excellent option for effective communication, but can be challenging when you don't share the same language and are deprived of the benefit of any visual clues.

Is that OK?

How do you know whether you have communicated effectively? You might be delivering remote training, or sending important instructions by email. In the absence of immediate feedback it is hard to know whether or not your meaning has been received. Of course you can, ask whether or not your listeners/readers understand, but can you rely upon the answer? Cultural politeness may mean that they answer in the affirmative in order not to offend you. They may think they understand because the words have certain meanings in their context which are different from what they mean in your context – they do understand, but not necessarily as fully as you intended.

How can you check the understanding of your audience? You can ask them to paraphrase or summarise what you have said. You can ask questions to test their comprehension. If you are running remote training you can assign a small task to check understanding. Do you know your colleagues well enough to be sure what will work for them? Can you keep testing comprehension without annoying or patronising them? Conversely, if you are receiving a request, can you be sure that you have you

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understood what they want. How many times can you double check? Acronyms and multiple word meanings can be a minefield even within your own culture, and that minefield expands with cross-border communication.

Shall I copy you in?

Most of us have experienced the effect of being copied into a mass email discussion. Often, when trying to communicate with a large group of colleagues in different offices, the easiest thing to do seems to be to include as many people as possible in the list of recipients, so as to be sure of not leaving anyone out. But is this useful? Or is it a lazy way of communicating? Being copied in to too many emails is deadening and leads to information overload. The sender may make the dangerous assumption that, just because they have copied you in, you will automatically notice the one sentence or question that is meant for you.

Before you send a mass email communication it may be useful to ask yourself a few questions. What do you want people to do with the information? Are you covering your back? Do you want them to know about something? Do you want them to respond to something? Do you want all your recipients to respond? Do you want approval for something? Does everyone need to know? Will your intentions be clear to all your recipients? Your readers may be asking themselves why they need to read through multiple emails (possibly in the wrong order) before they find the key message. They may be annoyed that because of the barrier of different time zones they are too late to make the salient point they wanted to raise. They may be frustrated that you did not take the time to summarise the main points that were relevant to them, or angry that they had to hunt for the question that you required them to answer.

Getting to know you

When liaising with colleagues in overseas offices it is more important than ever to ascertain the optimum time for communication. Your choice will, of course, depend on factors such as the urgency of the message, the time difference, and the optimum time to ensure that your colleague is receptive. Should you always communicate when you first have an idea? Might it be preferable to wait until you have refined your thoughts and can express

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yourself more clearly? Is it enough to say the bare minimum that you perceive to be necessary?

Communicating effectively with a colleague with whom you do not have the luxury of communicating on a face-to-face basis every day will often necessitate putting more time into the working relationship. You will almost certainly benefit from going the extra mile – from finding out more about the person at the other end of the phone or email, from understanding their priorities and pressures. Investing this time might mean that you avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and frustrations, and give yourself and them more of a chance to interpret messages, in whichever method they are delivered, in the way that they are intended.

CULTURE

Importance of understanding culture

These days we work in a global village where we are increasingly coming into contact with people from cultures that can be very different to our own. We are already familiar with interacting with our colleagues in the face to face environment, but we are now more frequently meeting and collaborating in the virtual environment of conference calls and webinars, this is now very often our place of work. It is therefore vital that we make the effort and go some way towards trying to understand other cultures, while also trying to understand how those other cultures view our own, in order to best manage our relationships and be more successful.

What do we mean by culture?

For many people, when they think of the word *culture*, they immediately think of its geographical connotations. But *culture* can be defined in a multitude of ways. Dictionary definitions usually incorporate a number of elements such as history, geographical location, language, religion, race, music, agriculture, art, beliefs, behaviour patterns, etc. But these definitions can sometimes become merely lists of categories and topics that do not really help the reader. Brooks Peterson provided a more useful definition for a practical understanding of the term: 'Culture is the relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by groups of people in countries or regions and the noticeable impact those values and beliefs have on the peoples' outward behaviours and environment'[1]. It is easy to see that many cultures have similarities, but often it will be the differences that create an impact.

The Iceberg Analogy

It is useful to think about culture in the context of the iceberg analogy. There are two parts to an iceberg – the tip of the iceberg which is easily visible, and the bottom of the iceberg which lies hidden beneath the water. Often the things we immediately identify about a particular culture may be things like language, food, music, clothing, art, emotional displays, gestures, hobbies, or the pace of life. These are the things that are easily perceived with our five senses and they are what we might immediately become aware of when encountering that culture.

However, it is those traits of a culture which are less easily seen, those that lie deeper under the surface, which are really worth identifying and understanding. When you can understand the deeper cultural values you can then begin to make sense of what is going on as it happens, and you can anticipate how people may act or react in certain situations. The difficulty is that many of these hidden cultural concepts are invisible and they are often unconscious characteristics.

Examples of these 'bottom of the iceberg' values are notions such as how the individual fits into society, beliefs about human nature, rules about relationships, preference for leadership systems, the importance of *face*, harmony and hierarchy, views about leaders, and comfort with risk.

It is important to remember, though, that values are not always predictors of behaviour and even if you know someone holds certain values it does not mean they will always behave in a certain way. It should be noted too that stereotyping is certainly not useful; this might only provide a partial picture of the person you may be working with and it may not be accurate. The point is that gaining a deeper understanding of these values will help you to improve your intercultural interactions, and help those interactions to be more successful.

Do's and Don'ts

There are many books and guides on regional protocol and behaviour, and there are lots of dos and don'ts you should think about, but to get a general idea here are some pointers on what to bear in mind:

- Greetings – how do people greet and address each other?

- Formality – should you dress and interact formally?

- Business cards – what role do business cards play? (In Japanese society, the business card represents the person named, so you should treat it with respect and not roll it up or use it to clean your nails!)

- Eye contact – is direct eye contact polite? Is it expected? (In some cultures, eye contact in a meeting is considered aggressive)

- Emotions – is it rude, embarrassing or usual to display emotions?

- Silence – is silence awkward? Is it expected, insulting or respectful?

- Eating – what are the proper manners for dining? Are certain foods taboo? Should you clear your plate of all food, or leave a small amount?

- Body language – are certain gestures or forms of body language rude?

- Punctuality – should you be punctual to a meeting and should you expect others to be punctual? Are schedules and agendas fluid or strictly adhered to?

- Gift giving – do business people exchange gifts? What would be appropriate as a gift? Are there any taboos associated with gift giving?

Another important piece of advice is not to copy any behaviour when you do not understand fully what is meant by it – you could get yourself in hot water, or mortally offend a colleague.

Cultural Dimensions

There are also a number of cultural dimensions to consider beyond the differences between countries. For instance, many organisations have their own culture. There can be cultural differences too when considering different professions. Often, as librarians, we will modify our language and body language when meeting with lawyers, compared to meeting with someone from the IT team or the marketing team, for example.

Other cultural dimensions that can impact your work include generational cultures. For example, in Japan the older generation place great store on long term relationships, respect and loyalty. For the younger Japanese culture, these notions are, perhaps, not as important as they used to be, which could have an impact on winning business or setting up new procedures in the workplace.

There are also dimensions surrounding the power structure of an organisation and whether all decisions have to go through a senior person or not, and also whether ideas need to be agreed as a collective or made by an individual.

Scenarios

There are many scenarios where the information professional could meet people from other cultures, and will need to be culturally aware in order to do their job to the highest standard.

Many of us already meet with our wider library team regularly via conference call because the staff is spread over multiple locations. In these meetings we need to think about our communication style, communication tools, and how to phrase things. For instance, it is helpful to talk more slowly, leave pauses for people whose first language is not English, and to avoid using slang.

Also, when participating in a virtual meeting via video-conference – especially if there are defined goals and decisions that need to be made at the meeting – it is important to consider that some people will not be happy airing their views within a group environment. Others may be used to being told what to do by the group leader, and others may simply not understand the

full extent of the discussion if their English is not very good. People working in some cultures might even agree with what is proposed simply because they do not like to be seen as being unhelpful or dissenting. This can obviously cause serious problems down the line.

Another situation that many of us have experienced is running a training session over the telephone. This takes on a whole new dimension when it is for someone working on an entirely different continent where the trainee will probably have a different cultural background, will not be able to pick up visual clues like body language, while their spoken English may not be perfect. They might even say that they understand what you are explaining, but actually they do not and they say this in order to 'save face'. This is common in some cultures, and it means you need to adapt your training session to take this into account.

Cultural Intelligence

So, what should those who wish to work more effectively with other cultures do? The simple answer is to learn to be more culturally intelligent. But note this is more than just learning and having knowledge about other cultures. It is also about having an awareness of how you are perceived by people in other cultures, and then, perhaps most importantly, adapting your specific skills and behaviours to interact more successfully. In fact, a formula for Cultural Intelligence might read:

Knowledge about cultures + Awareness of both yourself and others + Specific skills and adaptions of behaviour = Cultural Intelligence

One of the key aspects of cultural intelligence is learning to decode messages sent by someone else using *their* cultural filters, rather than using your *own* cultural filters. But this cuts both ways, so when communicating with someone else you need to be aware your message may be decoded by their cultural filters and may not be understood in the way you intended it.

It takes time to learn about other people and how they live and what is important to them, and you need to be patient as you go through that process. Also, always bear in mind that you shouldn't take offence at everything that is said – you may very well just be decoding the messages incorrectly. But once you start out on this journey it becomes easier to transfer your knowledge to other cultures, and you will learn to be a leader when interacting with your colleagues, and also to tap into the rich vein of knowledge and joy that most cultures possess.

CONTEXT

What is meant by context?

A further way to enhance effective cross cultural communication is to understand the contexts within which we operate. What is meant by context? It is that which underlies the cultural assumptions and the

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communication methods employed. Context explains how and why we and our colleagues view the world the way we do. It explains the way other people operate and it explains how our experiences are framed. It offers suggestions on how we can adapt our communication based on these broad perceptions.

Superficial similarity can be deceptive

One key reminder is to not assume that things that look and sound the same superficially really are similar. The maxim 'America and Britain are divided by a common language' is one to remember, with all kinds of every day language causing at best amusement, and at worst severe embarrassment. Use a well-known search engine to find out the name of one of the designated South Carolina state dances, and this will become clear.

In the context of law libraries, American and British versions of Lexis and PLC look different and carry different content. Not only are there jurisdictional differences but there are also differences in the depth and history of their coverage of topics. So although one's US colleagues may have a resource that seems the same, it bears checking as to what kind of content is there.

Context: time zones and body clocks

A further example follows on from the discussion above on planning international training sessions. How does context affect co-ordinating a training session with a colleague in Hong Kong office? Time zones constrain the availability of the trainer and trainee, broadly, it will have to take place in the morning UK time and in the evening Hong Kong time. The London trainer may have come to work early and the Hong Kong trainee might be staying late. This means the person receiving the training–or taking part in the negotiation, or meeting, or supervision conversation- is dealing with the task at the end of their day. How do you feel about having something possibly difficult or unpleasant looming over you? Have you ever reflected on how your thought processes and capacity may be less that optimal at the end of the day? If you are running the session at the beginning of the day, you are in a very different context to your overseas colleague.

How might one mitigate this difference? Can you run more, shorter sessions? Can you record a webinar so it can be replayed again? Can you send notes in advance so your colleague can read them and then deal with salient points on a call? This might also be helpful to bridge language barriers, as well as dealing with the context of meetings across different ends of the day.

One further point that bears repeating is that in a culture where 'saving face' is important, your colleague may not admit to not understanding what you have shared. Try to find ways of testing their comprehension – ask them to tell you how they would search a database, for example.

Education and status

Other ways in which context affects how we work include education and inter-office relationships.

Many US law librarians have a JD – Juris Doctor – a 3 year postgraduate course. Rarely in the UK does a job specify a legal qualification alongside an information degree – this is why BIALL's Legal Foundations course is popular. However, studying alongside those who are now attorneys, and understanding their thought processes more, may give the US librarians a different insight into the work of the lawyers. It's likely they understand the questions more easily than we do. Possibly they garner a bit more respect for being legally qualified, if only because they can very definitely 'talk the talk' and they understand how lawyers think. Possibly one of the difficulties new law librarians in the UK face is learning to think like a lawyer.

The consequence of this difference in qualifications is that the relationship between support staff and lawyers varies – within firms and within the UK, as well as across global offices.

Academic research

There is another use of context in conversations about cultural differences. It is incredibly important not to stereotype people according to national cultures. There are, however, national cultures and contexts that can and shape individuals' reactions and expectations.

Anthropologists have studied different organisations and settings, and described them in terms of high-context and low-context cultures. Edward T Hall developed four factors which influence cross-cultural interaction, calling them the 'silent language.' Context is one, alongside the way that space, communication and time are handled. (Hall, 1990, cited in Würtz 2005)[2]

Hall suggests people from high context cultures tend to be indirect and formal communicators. People from low context cultures tend to be direct and informal communicators.

What does that mean in practice?

In a high context culture one needs to understand that there are unwritten rules to be understood. This is why it can unwise to copy behaviour unless you understand it.

Hall's idea is that there is a continuum, not an absolute, scale. There are inherent dangers in over-generalising. The UK, America and Germany are usually seen as low context, whilst China and France are high context.

In a high-context culture, there are many contextual elements that help people to understand the rules. As a result, much is taken for granted. This can cause problems if someone does not understand the 'unwritten rules' of the culture. There is a relationship between the context and the culture.

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This might mean that Chinese colleagues discuss detail in advance of a meeting. The actual face-to-face formal session is more akin to a final ceremony where the pre-agreed decision is announced. This is important in the way of 'giving and keeping face'. Hence, purposeful discussions in that meeting would be seen as unnecessary because the decision is already clear to the participants. In contrast, and again, being wary of over-generalisation, Americans and Germans will tell meeting participants what information is necessary on the basis that the decision-making process takes place, more transparently, within the meeting.

In a low context culture there might be more focus on verbal communication than body language and time is highly organised. Being late for a meeting would be seen as the height of rudeness. Studies also suggest that attempts at humour will fail when translated from high-context to low-context.

A lower context culture demands more independence, and expects many relationships will be developed. A high context individual is more likely to ask questions rather than attempt to work out a solution independently, and the questions are likely to be asked from the same few people.

The high context person may be frustrated by people appearing to not want to develop a relationship or continue to help them on an ongoing basis.

Würtz undertook an exploration of the ideas about cross-context communication in a piece of research looking at the ways McDonalds' websites differ across its global territories. Her findings show that McDonald's was using different kinds of media in different countries and the differences co-incided with the high/ low context categorisation. For example, higher context countries such as Japan used more images compared to lower context Scandanavian sites. Low context sites also had less diversity in their layout than those in high context countries. Wurtz's findings have interesting implications for anyone designing a firm-wide intranet. A 'one size fits all' approach rarely works when dealing with different jurisdictions, but this research also suggests more subtle ways in which a standard intranet might be adapted to ensure it is effective in all global offices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As firms merge and grow, more of us are likely to be working with cross-border colleagues. Over time an awareness of how we communicate will become less of a barrier to spontaneity, and will instead allow us to develop our relationships with the library staff we rarely see. We hope that this article can provide some tips and clues in how to develop that awareness and perception.

Footnotes

[1] Peterson, Brooks (2004) *Cultural intelligence: a guide to working with people from other cultures*. Londona, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

[2] Würtz, E. (2005). A cross-cultural analysis of websites from high-context cultures and low-context cultures. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(1), article 13. http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue1/wuertz.html [accessed 8 August 2012]

Biographies

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Susanna Winter began her working life as a language teacher, but re-qualified in Librarianship and Information in 1999. She has worked for law firms for over twelve years, and was Library & Information Centre Manager at Baker & McKenzie LLP for 6 years. During this period she was an active member of both BIALL and CLIG, serving as chair of CLIG from 2006 to 2008. For the last three years she has combined her Library work with a part-time role in Corporate Social Responsibility, and in January 2012 made the move to the role of CSR Manager, co-ordinating Baker & McKenzie's pro bono work and charitable activity.