

# Leveraging Organisational Culture to Transform Offshore IT Service Delivery Teams

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## **Abstract**

High attrition rates in India's offshore service delivery centres not only put any provider's knowledge management and transfer processes to the test, but they are also a common grievance of end clients often resulting in a critical stance of the entire offshore delivery model. In order to make fundamental changes in how IT service delivery teams are organised, it is critical to understand the specific antecedents to employee commitment in the services sourcing industry in India.

We conducted empirical research in 2012 with 291 software engineers and managers working for two different offshore service providers in Pune and Bangalore linking employee commitment to organisational culture. Research outcome proposes that the Indian IT services sourcing industry should be adept at thinking about employee commitment from an organisational culture point of view. Correlation and linear regression analysis provided clear practical implications for architecting the management of offshore teams. First and foremost, organisations should cultivate ingroup collectivism and performance orientation. Other dimensions of organisational culture show a varying degree of positive and negative influence on employee commitment. Thus our research reinforces the need to continuously invest in programs, processes, and systems that target organisational culture and thereby improve employee commitment.

We have published the results of this study in the Journal of Indian Business Research, Vol. 5 No. 2, where a detailled data analysis can be found; this paper summarizes the findings and explains the changes proposed in managing offshore teams in order to increase employee commitment and bring down high attrition rates.

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## 1.0 Introduction:

Getting employees to do their best work is one of managers' most enduring and slippery challenges (Nohria et al., 2008) and hence talent management is fast gaining a top priority for organisations across the world (Bhatnagar, 2007). This especially holds true in trying circumstances, e.g. when the type of offshored work is perceived to be uninteresting by the employee, when the client rejects a deliverable, or when the own company's foreign front-office colleagues provide negative feedback.

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## 2.0 Content

## 2.1 The Challenge of Attrition

Demotivation of the employee base, even if it is unintended, often leads to attrition. Attrition can be expensive potentially impacting a provider's bottom line. This is especially true in an industry like India's services sourcing ('offshoring') industry where employees are the most important assets and which is at the same time on a high momentum path (cf. Bhatnagar, 2007; Deloitte, 2012; Kannan, 2008; Messner, 2010; and Thirulogasundaram & Kumar, 2012). The challenge of managing attrition is certainly not unique to India, but attrition is rarely witnessed in such intenseness in other geographies (FSA, 2005). Today, many IT service providers in India are already treating attrition and employee commitment as a business problem – and not just as one of many human resource management problems (e.g., Adachi, et al., 2012; Jain & Lobo, 2012; Kannan, 2008; Messner, 2009; and Neumann, 2012). There is a sense of urgency in the industry, which is a good starting point for a transformation activity (e.g., Kotter, 1995). Yet, there has been little research for the services sourcing industry in India directly linking the constructs of organisational culture with employee commitment (e.g., Raman, et al., 2007 and Bhatnagar, 2007; Budhwar, et al., 2006; Jha, 2011; Singh, 2007).

## 2.2 Finding a Solution: Empirical Study in Pune and Bangalore

In order to transform the way offshore projects are being managed, the influences of organisational culture on employee commitment in India's IT services sourcing industry needs to be understood. For this reason, the author conducted empirical research with two offshore service providers in Pune and Bangalore in the first half of 2012. When managers are left on their own to make connections, they sometimes create very inaccurate links (c.f., Kotter, 1995); empirical research is a conscious attempt to show managers in an objective way how proposed new approaches, behaviours, and attitudes can help to transform business.

Both companies participated in a larger intercultural up-skilling activity with ICCA™ (Intercultural Communication and Collaboration Appraisal, cf. Messner & Schäfer, 2012). Employees were invited by their managers to participate in this study on a voluntary basis and received a confidential assessment of their cultural predisposition, intercultural competencies, and organisational commitment fit as a

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tangible outcome and motivation to participate. The average age of the 291 respondents is just above 30 years and 25 per cent are female reflecting the typical demographics of India's services sourcing industry. Respondents have an average professional work experience of 7.4 years and have on average been 3.2 years in their current company; 52 per cent are executives without personnel responsibility and 37 per cent are typical offshore team managers heading teams of up to 10 people. Cronbach's alpha in combination with inter-item correlations was used as a reliability index for the underlying constructs (for more details see Messner, 2013).

## 2.3 Construct 1: Employee Commitment

Employee commitment is about an employee's loyalty to the organisation, the willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organisation, the degree of goal and value congruency between the employee and the organisation, and the employee's desire to maintain employed by the organisation (e.g., Bateman & Strasser, 1984). Committed employees provide a competitive advantage as postulated by the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Penrose, 1959). In order to sustain such competitive advantage, organisations should develop tacit knowledge with its employee base in an uncodified form as it is difficult for competitors to imitate (e.g., Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 2001; Barney, et al., 2011; Nelson & Winter, 1982; and Peteraf, 1993).

Employee commitment is a multidimensional and distinguishable construct consisting of three factors (Meyer & Allen, 1984; Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991; and Meyer & Allen, 1997):

- The affective factor describes an employee's emotional attachment, identification with, and involvement in the organisation and its goals. It results from individual and organisational value congruency.
- The normative factor reflects the sense of moral obligation to remain in an organisation, an old-style value of loyalty and duty. It is expressed by the extent to which an employee feels obliged to make personal sacrifices and not criticise the organisation.
- The continuity factor exhibits the individual's awareness of the costs of leaving an organisation. Close working relationships with other employees, community involvement, acquired job skills being unique to the organisation, and monetary investments, such as contributions to pension funds or stock

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options, can make it look too 'costly' for an employee to put in the papers and seek employment elsewhere.

On a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high), affective commitment shows a mean of  $\mu^1$ =4.15 (standard deviation of sd=0.93), normative commitment  $\mu$ =4.20 (sd=0.75), and continuance commitment  $\mu$ =3.33 (sd=0.84). The findings of this research should provide a fairly clear picture on the status of employee commitment in the Indian IT services sourcing industry as the sample of 291 is drawn from two different providers in two different locations and across a typical offshore project hierarchy.

Data analysis reveals a relatively high correlation ( $\rho$ =0.641,  $\alpha$ =0.00000) between affective and normative commitment showing that the feelings of desire (affective commitment) and obligation (normative commitment) to stay with the current employer go hand in hand in India. Similar employee commitment studies conducted in North America (as reported by Meyer, et al., 2002) tend to show lower correlation rates of less than 0.6. This could potentially lead to the conclusion that even at a modern and international workplace as India's IT industry provides, the feelings of desire and obligation are culturally influenced phenomena.

The correlation of affective and normative with continuance commitment ( $\rho$ =0.275 and  $\rho$ =0.349 respectively, both at significance level of  $\alpha$ =0.00000) is again noticeably higher as compared to North American studies, where ranges from  $\rho$ =0.13 to 0.20 and  $\rho$ =0.15 to 0.22 respectively are reported.

There is a low negative correlation between continuance commitment and the employee demographic variables of work experience ( $\rho$ =-0.182,  $\alpha$ =0.00178), age ( $\rho$ =-0.210,  $\alpha$  =0.00031), management span ( $\rho$ =-0.124,  $\alpha$ =0.03519), and time in company ( $\rho$ =-0.134,  $\alpha$  =0.02241). With increasing work experience, age, management span, and time spent in the organisation, employees see less of job opportunities outside their own organisation; with increasing work experience and age, the sacrifices felt on changing jobs increase. Since continuance commitment as well as the danger of attrition is highest with the entry-level employees, new organisational culture measures should first and foremost target this segment and then be continued as employees rise through the hierarchy levels.

Again, there is a difference to North American studies which tend to show positive path factors between age and employee commitment via job satisfaction (e.g., data

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$   $\rho$ : correlation;  $\alpha$ : significance level;  $\mu$ : arithmetic mean (average); sd: standard deviation; IT: information technology; RBV: resource-based view

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by Bluedorn, 1982 and Michaels & Spector, 1982 analysed by Williams & Hazer, 1986). This difference can potentially explained by national culture or the dynamics of India's services sourcing industry.

## 2.4 Construct 2: Organisational Culture

An organisational culture is "the 'glue' that guides behaviour and shapes organisational decision-making" (Haberberg & Rieple, 2008); it is "the way we do things around here" (Bower, 1966) and "what goes and what doesn't" (Heskett, 2011). Economic conditions, competition, nature of business and its employee base all affect organisational culture (e.g., Dickson, et al., 2004) and this makes it different from an organisation's mission or from its deliberate strategies, which both incorporate an element of consciousness (e.g., Haberberg & Rieple, 2008).

In management circles, culture is often viewed as something which can be used to manipulate employees; Kaplan & Norton, 2004 find that 'shaping the culture' is an often cited priority in balanced scorecard projects. Just as often, culture is viewed as the humanising element of corporate business, which helps to establish expectations between an employee and the organisation the employee works for, foster trust, facilitate communications, and build organisational commitment. The question, however, is not whether an organisation has a culture; organisational cultures form with or without clear intent. On the contrary, it is much more of interest to understand what variables measure how organisational culture is perceived by employees. As organisational culture reflects the society in which it is embedded (Javidan, et al., 2004), the GLOBE items (cf., Dickson, et al., 2004 and House, et al., 2004) were used by Messner & Schäfer, 2012 as a starting point to develop Team-ICCA™ as an integrated appraisal framework measuring organisational culture:

- Power distance is the degree to which people expect and agree that power should be shared unequally through an organisation (Carl, et al., 2004).
- Institutional collectivism is the degree to which an organisation encourages and rewards collective action and team spirit, even at the expense of individual goals, and whether being accepted by other team members is important (Gelfand, et al., 2004).
- In-group collectivism is the degree to which employees have a feeling of pride and loyalty towards the superiors and the organisation they work for. And vice versa, the degree to which the organisation and its managers show loyalty

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towards their employees and take pride in their individual accomplishments (Gelfand, et al., 2004).

- Assertiveness is the extent to which people should be assertive, aggressive, determined, confrontational, uncompromising, pushy, and tough in social relationships (Den Hartog, 2004).
- Future orientation describes the orientation towards planning vs. muddling through and aspiring long-term future rewards by sacrificing instant gratification (Ashkanasy, et al., 2004).
- Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which rules and processes are established to guide people and ambiguous situations are avoided through detailed planning, even at the expense of experimentation and innovation (DeLuque & Javidan, 2004).
- Performance orientation is the degree to which an organisation encourages and rewards its employees for performance, excellence, and innovation; this includes how employees drive themselves to improve their own performance by setting challenging goals for themselves (Javidan, 2004).
- Gender egalitarianism is the extent to which gender role differences are minimised while promoting gender equality with respect to education and professional development, management positions, physically demanding tasks, and sports (Emrich, et al., 2004).
- Humane orientation describes if employees are in general sensitive, friendly, generous, and concerned about others (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004).

# 2.5 Outcome: Impact of Organisational Culture on Employee Commitment

The nine dimensions of organisational culture were now related to employee commitment using correlation and multiple regression analysis.

The strongest correlation can be found between in-group collectivism and affective commitment at  $\rho$ =0.628; it is also correlated to normative commitment ( $\rho$ =0.450) and continuance commitment ( $\rho$ =0.203), always at  $\alpha$ <0.01. Performance orientation is also strongly correlated to all three employee commitment factors (affective at  $\rho$ =0.576, normative at  $\rho$ =0.375, and continuance at  $\rho$ =0.233, always at  $\alpha$ <0.01).

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Regression analysis conducted with LISREL 9.1 confirms these results by attaching strong weights to the equations (cf., Messner, 2013).

### In simple terms:

- When there is a reciprocal feeling of pride, loyalty, and active support structures between employees and the organisation, employees become emotionally attached and commitment increases. The management of service providers should lead by example so that employees can look up to them the same way as they revere elders in their family circles. Active support structures comprise both provisions for employees in need as well as encouragement of team working and networking.
- When employees work in an organisational environment which they perceive
  to encourage and reward them for performance, excellence, and innovation,
  their commitment to the organisation increases. Performance based pay as
  well as non-monetary reward systems based on group recognition of
  individual achievement appear to be important.

Humane orientation, uncertainty avoidance, and institutional commitment correlate positively but to a much smaller extent with employee commitment further suggesting that:

- Where people are perceived to be generally friendly and caring at the workplace, (affective) commitment increases.
- An organisational environment relying on rules and processes seems to have a positive impact on employee commitment.
- A focus on team spirit can improve (affective) commitment.

Power distance correlates negatively with (affective and normative) commitment. Bonding and sharing power throughout the organisation seems to help increase affective and normative commitment. Surprisingly, the data analysis shows no direct significant correlation with continuance commitment.

Changing an organisation's culture is one of the most difficult leadership challenges because organisational culture is a system of goals, values, processes, roles, practices, and assumptions Single-fix changes are not likely to be successful, because the interlocking will take over and manoeuvre the attempted change





inexorably back into the existing system (e.g., Denning, 2011). When employees shift from project to project, from one client assignment to the next, they practically shift between organisational subcultures; they are exposed to and need to adjust to different expectations and procedures of working. Organisational culture measures need to take this unique phenomenon of India's offshore services sourcing industry into account as otherwise the sub-cultures will write over organisational culture (Lok & Crawford, 1999).

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## 3.0 Conclusion

Our research unveils a number of implications for transforming the management and leadership practise in India's IT services sourcing industry. We realize that in academic research, the recommendations are made to sound a bit too simplistic. In reality, successful human resources transformation efforts are messy and full of surprises. But a relative simple guiding principle is needed to steer organisations through a major change and simplicity can reduce the error rate (cf., Kotter, 1995 and Rumelt, 2011).

In order to make fundamental changes, it is important to identify and understand the dimensions of organisational culture and develop measures for changing the same as "organisation[al] culture is central to any activity in the organisation." (Singh, 2007). It is equally important to realize that the dynamics are different in every organisation and team; in order to develop concrete recommendations for implementing a methodology on the firm level, the study's underlying diagnosis framework Team-ICCA™ (Intercultural Communication Collaboration Appraisal, see Messner & Schäfer, 2012) can be used to analyse organisational culture and employee commitment at the level of teams.

Realigning the way employees are managed and work together by transforming selected dimensions of organisational commitment will help teams in India's services sourcing industry to boost employee commitment, contain attrition rates, and deliver constant quality in a rapidly changing economic and working environment.

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