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# CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES IN MULTICULTURAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION



HAAGA-HELIA  
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*“We want all our external communication in English to be of high quality, which is a bit of a challenge...”*

– Communications Director of a large internationally operating company –

# 1

## Introduction

■ Due to on-going globalization on all fronts, corporate tasks are increasingly carried out by employees from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To address this reality, business instructors need to make sure that business students “are provided sound instruction on intercultural/communication skills”, as McPherson and Szul (2008, 41) point out. In particular, it is vital to familiarize students with practical success strategies for dealing with corporate communication tasks across cultures. As Poncini (2003, 91) states, “[m]ore research into intercultural business communication needs to go beyond a focus on miscommunication and cultural differences. Research that increases our understanding of what helps make intercultural business communication successful can contribute to pertinent training activities.”

This paper discusses multicultural corporate communication challenges and successes in internationally operating companies with either headquarters or local offices in Finland. The selected findings presented here are based on the results of a research and development project focused on examining, through face-to-face interviews, how Bachelors of Business Administration (hereafter BBAs) and Communications Directors in Finland experience multicultural corporate communication today. The overall objective of the project is to obtain knowledge with which to help future BBAs, and employees and companies in general, to better meet the complex communication challenges arising in multicultural business settings. (For similar goals, see for example McPherson & Szul 2008, O’Rourke 2005, Chaney & Martin 2004, Reynolds & Valentine 2004, Ferrel & Hirt 2001).

The language used in multicultural business contexts is predominantly English. One might think that this is simple, since English is widely spoken all over the world. Moreover, the services of specialist translators

can always be used, should some more demanding needs arise. The reality of the matter, however, is much more complex. Successful corporate communication in multicultural contexts in English requires that several company internal and company external parties work together seamlessly. The subject of multicultural corporate communication is therefore here approached not only from the point of view of employees' personal communication skills but especially also from the perspective of corporate strategy and the organization of the corporate communication function and processes. To be successful, individuals working in multicultural business environments need to understand the impact of their communicative actions in direct connection with corporate strategy. In addition to developing their personal communication skills, employees are also in charge of improving the overall communication framework within which the corporate strategy is realized and implemented. The organization of corporate communication processes needs to be constantly monitored and developed to better support the corporate goals.

Put in the words of van Riel and Fombrun, "by developing an integrated communication system, an organization can flesh out a structure for corporate communication that can assist in the implementation of strategic objectives, build brand and reputation, and thereby create economic value" (2007, 9). What this requires in practice is that each and every employee understands the relevance of a systematically built and "fully coordinated communication system" and realizes that "when orchestration of communications is limited, an organization's image and reputation are put at risk" (2007, 3). O'Rourke sums the matter up as follows: "the organizations which employ us and the businesses which depend on our skills now recognize that communication is at the center of what it means to be successful" (2005, viii). Successful corporate communication is difficult even when a company operates within the confines of one country. To build and maintain a coordinated corporate communication system in international and multicultural business environments is a much more complicated effort still.

In what follows, we first briefly discuss the concept of multicultural corporate communication. This theoretical overview is followed by a description of the informants and methods of the study. After this, we discuss selected multicultural corporate communication challenges and successes that came up during the interviews. Along with this discussion, we also present general development suggestions for both companies operating internationally and for BBA education. The final section contains a summary of main findings.

# 2

## Multicultural Corporate Communication

■ This section begins by briefly discussing the use of English in multicultural corporate communication. After that, we define the concept of corporate communication as it is used in this paper. In conclusion, we explain our understanding of the multicultural aspect of corporate communication.

### 2.1 English as the Joint Language

At companies operating internationally, corporate communication tasks are nowadays predominantly carried out in English. The use of English has become widespread at all organizational levels and in various types of companies and company units (cf. Louhiala-Salminen & al. 2005, 406–7, Akar 2002, Bilbow 2002).<sup>1</sup> The globalization of business life and the uncontested role of English as the language of multicultural communication have created a new pedagogical context for educating business professionals to work across languages and cultures. English is often the common means of interaction for encounters involving language users from varying linguistic, cultural, organizational and corporate backgrounds. Regardless of their linguistic backgrounds, both native and non-native language users face a variety of challenges when English is used for corporate communication across cultures.

As both our BBA and Communications Director informants pointed out, language skills and international experience are extremely important in today's business environment and even a prerequisite for recruitment. In addition to an excellent knowledge of English, it is often useful to possess skills in other foreign languages as well. However, our informants also stressed that without an ability to create relationships and networks, even

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<sup>1</sup> The role of English as the language of global communication is also discussed by e.g. Seidlhofer (2001), Lesznyak (2002), Mauranen (2003) and Nickerson (2005), to mention but a few.

an individual with the best of linguistic and cultural skills and knowledge may fail in fulfilling the corporate goals. This underlines the importance of looking at communication from corporate and organizational perspectives. In what follows, individual communicators are viewed as part of a larger whole, as staff members and contributors to corporate success and reputation within a certain established corporate communication framework.

## 2.2 What Is Corporate Communication?

To be able to talk about corporate communication as a holistic framework, there is a need to touch upon a number of complex and partially overlapping concepts such as corporate identity, corporate image, corporate strategy, corporate brand, and corporate reputation. These concepts cannot be treated at length here. For the purposes of the present paper, only brief operative definitions of them are given to facilitate the reader's general understanding and to enable him/her to follow the main trains of thought presented in this article.<sup>2</sup>

As van Riel and Fombrun (2007, 35–36) emphasize, all corporate communication should be based on sound communication policy guidelines. They go on to point out that common corporate communication guidelines help organizations build a distinctive image, a strong brand and, ultimately, an appealing reputation. There are a number of different ways in which the field of corporate communication can be described and segmented. Figure 1 demonstrates van Riel and Fombrun's conception of corporate communication as a holistic system:

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<sup>2</sup> There is extensive international literature on corporate branding, which the scope of the present paper does not allow us to explore. During BBA studies, students usually familiarize themselves with the conceptual field related to brands and branding as part of their marketing curriculum. What often receives much less attention, however, is the crucial role of corporate communication in the process of brand building and reputation management. In this paper, the focus is therefore on presenting a working notion of corporate communication.



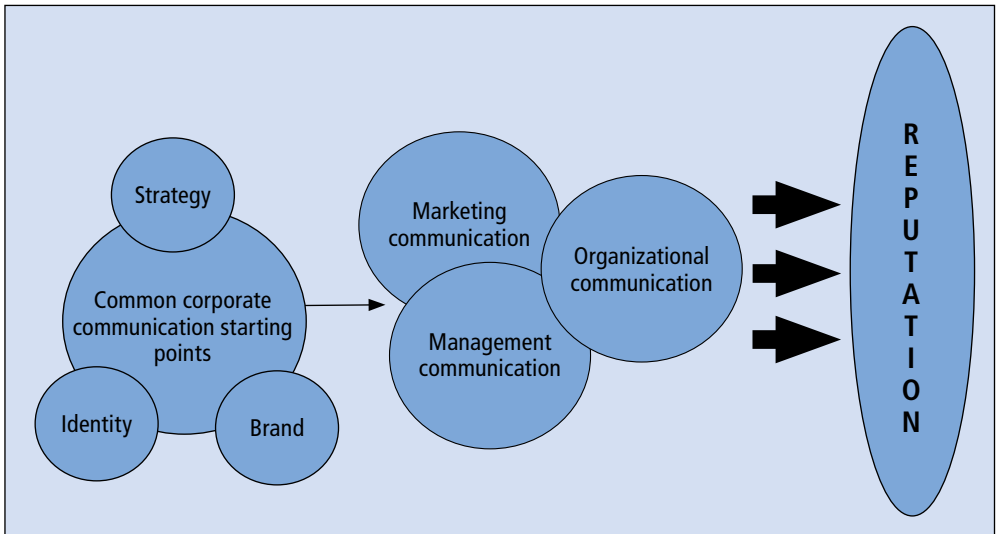


Figure 1. Corporate Communication System. Adapted from van Riel and Fombrun (2007, 35).

Van Riel and Fombrun see that the guidelines which provide the basis for the organization and implementation of successful corporate communication are 1) *corporate identity* (i.e. what the company is, stands for, and desires to be), 2) *corporate image* (i.e. what the company ‘looks like’ to its audiences, a set of features that people attach to it in their minds), 3) *corporate strategy* (i.e. a systematic plan of the overall competitive position and aims of a company and of the ways in which these aims are to be achieved), and 4) *corporate brand* (i.e. the distinctive and value-creating images, perceptions, and even comprehensive systems of understanding associated to the company as a whole by its different audiences). According to van Riel and Fombrun, if companies really want to build corporate brands and use them as a competitive advantage, they are nowadays “challenged as never before to develop a coherent communication system.” Van Riel and Fombrun see an effectively functioning communication system as “a vital component of every company’s strategy-setting and execution” that creates value and helps improve the company’s overall *corporate reputation* (i.e. *the ultimate effects*, good or bad, that corporate images and brands have on the *overall evaluations* or *estimations* by a company’s different stakeholders and other audiences) (2007, 4–8, 39, 40, 44). In this paper, we share van Riel and Fombrun’s view that creating an appealing reputation for an organization “belongs at the top of the corporate communication agenda” (2007, 36). A good reputation makes a company attractive to its

audiences, and the ultimate aim of corporate communication is to build and manage corporate reputation.<sup>3</sup>

The corporate communication function in itself is divided by van Riel and Fombrun into three theoretically defined areas: 1) management communication, 2) marketing communication, and 3) organizational communication. Management communication refers to the strategic level of corporate communication, coordinated by management and other key personnel and geared to building a favorable reputation for the organization. Management communication “includes functions such as planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling” and its task is to make sure that all levels of the organization develop a shared vision of the company goals (2007, 15). The role of marketing communication is “to support sales of products, services, and brands” and it includes functions such as “product advertising, direct mail, personal selling, and sponsorship activities” (2007, 14, 17). Organizational communication, in turn, has a long-term perspective to reputation building and encompasses functions such as “public relations, public affairs, investor relations, environmental communication, corporate advertising, and employee communications” (2007, 20). Van Riel and Fombrun go on to point out that the role of both marketing communication and organizational communication is to support management communication as effectively as possible. In their view, successful corporate communication entails that “managers must realize the possibilities and limitations of their own roles in the communication process” and that “specialists in all areas of communication must understand how to support management in their communications” by acting as “advisors to management” and by contributing “professionally and critically to the implementation of the organization’s objectives.” (2007, 14–15).

In practice, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to draw clear lines between management communication, marketing communication, and organizational communication. In the operational everyday framework within which we approach the challenges and successes of corporate communication in this paper, it is precisely the cooperation and mutual support between different communicating parties in multicultural corporate contexts that matter. We do not divide the functions or processes of corporate communication as belonging to any one of van Riel and Fombrun’s three categories, even if we do acknowledge the theoretical value that such a categorization has in clarifying the overall field and concept of corporate communication. Neither do we delve into the separate content areas that

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these concepts in Finnish, see, for example, Aula & Heinonen (2002). For more on strategic reputation management, see Aula & Mantere (2006).

make up management communication, marketing communication, or organizational communication. Rather, we focus on the functioning of a holistic corporate communication *system*, where each and every employee has his/her own role and responsibilities geared to fulfilling common corporate goals.

The data obtained for this research clearly underlines that increased internationalization requires companies to reorganize their communications functions and processes. Going global necessitates that companies make use of new types of corporate and organizational knowhow and new kinds of support services. In practice, this often means getting new cooperation partners. In order to successfully communicate across cultures in English or, when necessary, in other foreign languages, companies must carefully consider (and frequently reconsider) the ways in which multicultural corporate communication is *organized*: processes, responsibilities, channels, in-house support systems, teamwork, project management, external networking, acquisition of specialist services, quality control, and so on. Such a need to focus on the organizational knowhow relating to corporate communication and to integrate it with strategic corporate knowhow is demonstrated by van Riel and Fombrun (2007, 23), when they state that the main responsibilities of corporate communication are:

- to flesh out the profile of the “company behind the brand” (corporate branding);
- to develop initiatives that minimize discrepancies between the company’s desired identity and brand features;
- to indicate who should perform which tasks in the field of communication;
- to formulate and execute effective procedures in order to facilitate decision-making concerning communication;
- to mobilize internal and external support behind corporate objectives.

The list above includes both corporate and organizational aspects, ranging from corporate branding and reputation building to the practical organization of support systems and other communication responsibilities. Doorley and Garcia, in their discussion of reputation management, in fact use the concept of “corporate and organizational communication”, which is much in line with both van Riel and Fombrun’s theory and with the understanding of the field of corporate communication in this paper. Doorley and Garcia, too, see corporate communication ultimately as a function that is “a critical contributor to an organization’s reputation – and thereby its competitiveness, productivity, and financial success” (2007, ix).

Our use of the concept of corporate communication is also in line with the somewhat more concrete and practical theoretical discussions by Argenti and Forman, who see corporate communication in general as “the corporation’s voice and the images it projects of itself on a world stage populated by its various audiences [...]”. According to their definition, the field includes “areas such as corporate reputation, corporate advertising and advocacy, employee communications, investor relations, government relations, media management, and crisis communication”. On the one hand, Argenti and Forman see corporate communication as “a *function* that may be centralized or dispersed across a company’s units”. In this sense, it is comparable to such traditional functions as marketing and accounting. On the other hand, corporate communication also refers to “the processes a company uses to communicate all its messages” to its various audiences. In this paper, Argenti and Forman’s *function* corresponds to the notion of corporate knowhow and *processes* to the notion of organizational knowhow as discussed above (Argenti & Forman 2002, 4).

In Argenti and Forman’s view, the concept of corporate communication also refers to a shared *attitude* towards communication within the company and to the *products* that the company actually creates to address its internal and external audiences (2002, 4). Such typical corporate communication products are, for example, different types of email messages, press releases, reports, web sites, brochures, advertisements, blogs, video clips, customer feedback discussions, and so on. In the present approach, these latter two aspects are integrated into the corporate and organizational aspects of corporate communication. Our focus is not on individual communication products or any specific types of products, but on the framework within which the products are created and received. The nature of a shared communication culture in an organization, what Argenti and Forman call attitude toward communication, and the quality of the actual communication products are here seen as significantly dependent on the management of the corporate communication function and on the organization of the communication processes. If the corporate communication function and the management of communication processes do not work as they should, there will most likely be problems in the overall communication culture and in the quality of the concrete communication products. This paper emphasizes that it is through developing the corporate communication *function* and *processes* that it is ultimately possible to develop and improve what Argenti and Forman call *attitude* and *products*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed discussion of corporate communication is beyond the scope of this paper. In research into the communication practices of companies and other organizations, several partially overlap-

## 2.3 What Does 'Multicultural' Mean?

Finally, the term 'multicultural' is adopted here to highlight the multilayered nature of the situations in which corporate communication across cultures (especially in English) nowadays takes place. As stated by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, 404), "[i]n multicultural situations, the various cultures of the interactants interact with and influence encounters, which, in turn, influence the nature of discourse." In the corporate world, cultural influences on communication may stem from not only the native language and national cultures of the interactants, but also from the organizational and other cultures that the interactants are associated with. As Louhiala-Salminen et al. point out (2005, 408), it may be "difficult to distinguish between the effects of national, corporate, or organizational cultures on communication." We agree that corporate and organizational cultures often lie at the root of multicultural challenges. However, it is important to point out that our use of the notion of multicultural corporate communication always also involves an international aspect. This is to say that the multicultural challenges and successes analyzed in this paper entail communication between people originating from two or more nations.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, our understanding of multicultural corporate communication is largely in line with what Appelbaum and Belmuth call global corporate communication: "the planned, long-term, strategically designed way of managing relationships with publics of other nations" (2007, 241).

In this paper, however, corporate communication between publics of different nations is seen to take place not only when people from different national geographical locations interact but also when people from different national cultures communicate in a shared national context. The number of foreign employees working in Finland has increased considerably over the past few years, and multicultural corporate communication within the domestic market is nowadays very common. We increasingly encounter foreigners in various professional contexts on home turf, as our bosses, colleagues, team members, customers, and cooperation partners, for example.

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ping concepts can be found: corporate communication, business communication, organizational communication, management communication, employee communication, integrated marketing communication, public relations, and so on. For more on the subject, see, for example, van Riel & Fombrun (2007), Doorley & Garcia (2007), Argenti (2007), and Theaker (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Corporate communication might also be approached as multicultural without it being international (for example, in the case of a merger of large national corporations with different corporate and organizational cultures).

Our data confirms that BBAs often work within and across a variety of organizations with different management cultures. The business encounters reported in the data demonstrate that working in multicultural teams is common practice nowadays and that employees interact with colleagues and customers of a number of different nationalities and corporate and organizational cultures routinely. In addition, the need to manage projects across a variety of cultures was strongly brought up by our informants. In multicultural environments, employees need cultural skills which help them switch quickly from one culture to the next and manage overlapping processes in cooperation with a number of people from different cultures. To emphasize the multiplicity of the layers of culture at work and the overriding idea of doing many things at the same time with many people from many cultures, we prefer the term *multicultural* over *intercultural* or *cross-cultural*, which are both frequently used in literature on the subject.

In sum: the companies and their employees included in this study operate in multicultural settings and therefore practice multicultural corporate communication requiring not only *individual knowhow* but also *corporate knowhow* and *organizational knowhow*. In order to analyze the challenges and successes related to multicultural corporate communication, such a holistic background should be taken as the starting point.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Huhta (2010, 252) also underlines the importance of “holistic scenes” of professional communities and communication needs when it comes to investigating language and communication for professional purposes.

# 3

## Methods

### 3.1 Informants

■ This paper is based on interviews with two groups of informants. First, interviews were carried out with 20 BBAs who graduated from a Finnish University of Applied Sciences and work for companies with international operations. The informants include ten BBAs specialized in Advertising and Corporate Communications and ten BBAs specialized in Financial Management. The informants graduated between 2002 and 2007 and had 1–6 years of post-graduation work experience at the time of the interviews. The informants were chosen in such a way that they represent different organizational positions, ranging from assistant level to specialist and management levels. The informants have a relatively fresh recollection of BBA studies and they all work in positions involving international tasks. The BBA informants can be seen as what Bargiela-Chiappini (2003, 92) refers to as “useful inhouse sources”, who in this case have amassed sufficient practical experience to reflect on both BBA education and the realities of working life.

The second group of interviewees consists of 15 Communications Directors from large international companies and from advertising, communications, and media agencies with international experience, clients, and operations. These interviewees represent 15 different companies. The interviews with Communications Directors were carried out in order to put the BBA informants’ views into a wider perspective in terms of multicultural corporate communication and how it is organized and practiced at international companies today.

### 3.2 Interviews

Multicultural corporate communication is a swiftly developing, so far largely uncharted, area in Finland. Personal face-to-face interviews were seen as the best way to collect concrete opinions, experiences and reflections from persons working in the front line of multicultural corporate

communication. The primary selection criterion for all informants was relevant work experience. In other words, informants with appropriate professional backgrounds were chosen for the interviews.

The Communications Directors selected as informants represented leading internationally operating companies and communications agencies in Finland. Some of the agencies belonged to international chains and some were independent players with international networks. The BBA informants represented two different specialization areas. The BBAs in Advertising and Corporate Communications had been specifically trained for corporate communication positions, and communication played a significant role in their job descriptions. The BBAs in Financial Management had been trained for financial management positions. Even if their job descriptions were not focused on communication, they were nevertheless commonly involved in various multicultural corporate communication tasks in their work. The data collected from BBAs in Advertising and Corporate Communications and that collected from BBAs in Financial Management are not categorized separately in the analysis. Both informant groups reported on very similar communication challenges and successes, with the exception that the former group typically had more experience in both external and internal communication, while the latter group had mainly been involved in internal communication. The BBAs in Advertising and Corporate Communications interacted with both the company's external and internal audiences as part of their jobs, while the job descriptions of the Financial Management BBAs less frequently involved direct communication with company external audiences.

Information was collected through qualitative in-depth face-to-face interviews of 1 to 1.5 hours each. The interviews were carried out between the spring of 2007 and the fall of 2008. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed word for word. The interview data was analyzed in view of the three types of multicultural corporate communication knowhow discussed above: not only individual but also corporate and organizational. The language of the interviews was Finnish in all except one case where English, the informant's native language, was used. The native language of the interviewees was used in order to secure the richness and accuracy of the qualitative data obtained. All Finnish-language interview extracts included in this paper were translated into English by the authors, who are both qualified Finnish-English translators. Moreover, both authors have practical work experience in multicultural corporate communication, which improves the reliability of data analysis. In order to secure reliability during data collection, the confidentiality of the interviews was emphasized and all interview data is thus reported in such a way that individuals or specific companies cannot be identified.



The interviews were semi-structured. They focused on the interviewees' experiences and opinions on multicultural corporate communication challenges and successes on the basis of the following research questions:

- What sort of multicultural corporate communication tasks are faced in today's corporate life?
- What sort of multicultural corporate communication challenges have the informants faced?
- What sort of practical success strategies and support measures have the informants used to overcome the challenges of multicultural corporate communication?
- How would the informants develop corporate and organizational knowhow relating to multicultural corporate communication?
- How would the informants develop BBA education to better equip graduates to face multicultural corporate communication challenges?

The informants were invited to recount their experiences freely so that a variety of narratives on challenges and respective success strategies in multicultural corporate communication situations could be obtained. In their narratives, the informants were encouraged to adopt an analytical view of the situation described. They were invited to reflect on the reasons underlying challenges and successes. They were also asked how they would use their learning experiences to enhance the chances of success in the future, not only from their personal point of view but also, and most importantly, from the point of view of the corporate and organizational communication knowhow of the company as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The individual companies where the interviewees work, or their respective industries, are not given any specific emphasis here. Large international companies are, naturally, often more advanced in their multicultural corporate communication than smaller players. The focus here, however, is on the interviewees' experiences. The size of the company along with its stage and scope of internationalization may be implied in the interviewees' comments reported, but they are not the center of interest in the analysis.

# 4

## Multicultural Corporate Communication Tasks

■ This section offers a general discussion of the types of multicultural corporate communication tasks that came up during the interviews with the Communications Directors and BBAs.

The interviews with Communications Directors from both large international companies and from communications agencies providing international services demonstrate that companies in Finland are undergoing major changes in their corporate communication functions to meet international needs. The Communications Directors pointed out that with internationalization, the role of corporate communication has been upgraded. The top management has learned to understand the strategic role of communication better, which is why both internal and external communication processes have been reorganized to better support the corporate goals. With such reorganization, the resources – and correspondingly the expectations – related to corporate communication have gone up.

The Communications Directors working for communications agencies say that their operations have become more and more international along with those of their clients. These interviewees typically divided their international cases into three types: strategic planning, localization, and adaptation. Strategic planning involves a deep partnership between the agency and the client: the decisions concerning multicultural corporate communication are made in close cooperation, starting from the analysis of the target market with its trends and buying behaviour, all through to the publication of concrete communication products. In localization, the communications agency works as a sparring partner and a consultant for the client company regarding the needs to make changes to communication according to the requirements of local conditions. In the cases involving adaptation, multicultural corporate communication is based on the translation of communication materials. These three levels are not mutually exclusive but connected with each other. The Communications Directors emphasized that in multicultural corporate communication, it is crucial to understand the big picture, the corporate strategy and its re-

alization in a specific foreign market. This big picture affects everything in communication from the organization of processes, to the selection of communication channels, all the way to specific choices of images, colours, and words in the concrete communication products.

The interviews with Finnish BBAs showed that the informants face a wide range of multicultural corporate communication tasks in their work, from everyday conversation with foreign colleagues to demanding presentations on highly specialized topics and from the reading and writing of casual e-mail messages to most complex written documents to and from a variety of business partners from all four corners of the world. The informants were also involved in communication planning ranging from large international campaigns to specific projects with narrower objectives. It was interesting to see that all BBA informants faced demanding multicultural corporate communication situations frequently, and the nature of these situations did not vary significantly according to their job description or the level of their position in the organization. Assistants were just as involved in complex multicultural communication tasks and encounters as were specialists and managers.

# 5

## Challenges and Successes in Multicultural Corporate Communication

■ This section discusses the general challenges and successes that both BBAs and Communications Directors have experienced in multicultural corporate communication situations. As a prerequisite for success, our interviewees underline the importance of strategic understanding and networking.

### 5.1 From Individual Skills toward Corporate and Organizational Knowhow

When it comes to the BBA informants' experiences as *individuals* in challenging multicultural corporate communication situations, they feel that they generally in fact succeed quite well. This is especially so with regard to purely linguistic issues, whereas personal cultural skills were the area in which more challenges and development needs cropped up. Sometimes, however, the BBA informants reported problems linked to specialized English terminology, especially when entering a new job at a new company with its own house style and industry specific jargon:

Organizational jargon is something I was not familiar with. For example, refined terminology related to fund-raising was unknown to me.

The scope of linguistic training during BBA studies is relatively limited and the variety of jobs that BBAs may enter is very broad. The terminology and communication situations encountered in different business sectors and positions is so varied that BBA education can only cover the basics, and more job-specific knowhow has to be obtained on the job through corporate training materials, in-house instructions, the help of colleagues, and the like. Employees operating in multicultural organizations are not

normally alone when faced with multicultural challenges. Organizational support is – and should be – available to everyone. One simple example of this are the various printed and electronic resources that employees have access to in their work, namely dictionaries, reporting guidelines, parallel documents, and model templates available on the Internet or in company internal databases such as the intranet. Such sources can be used for support in routine tasks or when a sudden need arises.

The BBAs interviewed were relatively well familiar with the kinds of networks, both human and virtual, and other support measures that they can resort to in order to resolve purely linguistic problems. A BBA informant, for example, explained that in the banking sector in Finland various materials, such as documents for housing loans or some other types of agreement, may be available in Finnish only. As there is not always time to obtain official translations when receiving foreign customers, our informant has therefore had to provide tentative English versions of various documents at short notice. In so doing, s/he has relied on a range of sources to find suitable translations for customers from different cultural backgrounds. The example shows that the key to business success can reside in good support materials that the employee can resort to and in the ability to react quickly and creatively when unexpected multicultural communication needs arise. Our BBA informant has clearly grasped the importance of high-quality service to corporate reputation:

It seems that the number of foreign customers is increasing all the time; they have a tight reference network and if they get good service [...] they bring in new customers.

In the interviews with Communications Directors, the need to improve employees' language and culture skills came up emphatically and repeatedly. Linguistic skills and cultural knowhow are taken as self-evident professional requirements. Communications Directors often stated that individuals' linguistic and cultural skills increase and develop with international experience, and these skills can then be shared in teams. Many international companies recommend to their employees exchange periods in company offices abroad or training courses that bring together employees from different countries. Such events were seen as efficient ways to accumulate multicultural knowhow both for individual employees and for the company as a whole. Last but not least, the Communications Directors also underlined the need for knowhow in obtaining external services when corporate goals and in-house communication skills do not meet.

The Communications Directors insisted on the importance of the strategic understanding that each and every employee must have to be able

to make the crucial link between communication and corporate goals and reputation. When companies go international, internal communication is often reorganized in order to be able to communicate a shared identity and strategic vision across borders. The need for external communication, too, is typically heightened in an international environment. Press relations and global crisis management, for example, require new networks and new expertise. The same applies to communication knowhow related to, for example, investor relations and corporate social responsibility, as exemplified by the following comment by a Communications Director:

The importance of investor relations is self-evident. Climate change is an example of a megatrend that we all have to address. When the company operates globally, we have to, for example, explain how we treat people from different parts of the world. That is what social responsibility is about.

Since these activities often require a keen awareness of local conditions, it is not possible to manage them single-handedly from the company headquarters in Finland or in any other one country. While it is recommendable to centralize certain corporate communication operations to the company's head office, active cooperation networks with local partners are also necessary. As a result, companies face a situation where the processes of both internal and external communication must be organized and coordinated much more carefully than before to build and maintain a favorable corporate reputation internationally. As many of our informants underline, there needs to be a careful balance between standardized modes of operation on the one hand and adapted solutions tailored to local needs on the other.

The interview data yielded five main areas of corporate communication that are of special interest when we talk about multicultural challenges and successes:

- corporate reputation
- internal communication
- teamwork
- the acquisition of external services
- quality control

Each of these areas can be traced back to *corporate knowhow* and *organizational knowhow* related to multicultural corporate communication as described previously. We will now address each of these issues in more detail.

## 5.2 Corporate Reputation in Multicultural Settings

This section deals with the informants' experiences of the interrelations between multicultural corporate communication, relationship building, and corporate reputation. As briefly established in Section 2 above, corporate reputation encompasses corporate identity (what the company is), corporate image (how the company appears in the eyes of its publics), and corporate brand (what distinguishes the company as a whole from its competitors in a value creating way). Corporate reputation, then, is the overall sum of what it is that the company actually does and how its actions are evaluated. Reputation building refers to the systematic managing of the way in which a company's identity, image and actions are *perceived and talked about* by different groups of people, such as investors, customers and employees. Whether a company's reputation is considered to be a good or a bad one is of central importance to overall corporate success (cf. Argenti & Forman 2002, 68–69; Aula & Mantere 2006, 33–36; Doorley & Garcia 2007, ix; Appelbaum & Belmuth 2007, 261, 262; and van Riel & Fombrun 2007, 9).<sup>8</sup> Corporate reputation is what the discussion of multicultural corporate communication in this paper ultimately boils down to: communicating and interacting successfully with different interest groups from different parts of the world is the prerequisite for building corporate reputation in the globalizing world.

The Communications Directors often brought up the direct relationship between multicultural communicative success and corporate success. The same issue is also well documented in communication research and professional publications, as Hilton's (2007, 36) comment exemplifies: “[a]ttaining a high level of cultural proficiency has tangible business benefits for the organization”, which means that “a very ‘soft’ aspect of communication translates into a better bottom line.”<sup>9</sup> Smooth processes of multicultural corporate communication and the skillful use of various support systems when communicating across cultures make a crucial contribution to corporate success and corporate reputation. To secure success and reputation, among the vital skills in multicultural corporate communication competence is an acute awareness of the risks involved in international reputation building and an ability to assess where there is a need to seek and use assistance by specialists. According to our data, this

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<sup>8</sup> For more on corporate reputation, see for example Dowling (2001), Jolly (2001), Aula & Heinonen (2002), Aula & Mantere (2006), Doorley & Garcia (2007), and van Riel & Fombrun (2007).

<sup>9</sup> O'Rourke (2005, viii) and Andersen & Rasmussen (2004, 241), for example, present a similar opinion. The necessity of discussing language as a macro-level corporate variable in multinational contexts is also underlined by e.g. Luo and Shenkar (2006).

has been understood better and better by top management and, as a result, the role of the corporate communication function has been thoroughly rethought, as illustrated by the Communications Director informants:

With internationalization, the top management's understanding of what corporate communication can do and in what ways communication supports corporate goals and problem solving has grown significantly. We can say that the international market and media environment have shown concretely how dramatic the consequences can be if communication is not proactive and open and if communication does not take place in the correct way and at the correct moment.

The need to place special focus on issues such as crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, and press relations in multicultural settings was brought up by most of the Communications Directors. They pointed out that if these are not planned and implemented effectively, the corporate reputation may, in the worst case, be lost overnight.

Another focus of attention brought up by the Communications Directors was the challenging task of fleshing out corporate messages internationally, especially through internal communication. Although the strategic role of corporate communication is better understood than before, organizing the practical corporate communications processes in such a way that they truly support corporate strategy, brand, and reputation is not an easy task. Even if English is used as a joint corporate language, challenges do arise, as the following comments by Communications Directors show:

Brand building and brand management used to belong to the marketing function, but now it is the responsibility of the communication function. Many basic issues are already in a good shape, but we still have a lot to do in order to make the brand truly support our corporate strategy and goals. [...] It is a question of implementing strategic changes throughout the multinational organization.

It would of course be much simpler if we operated just in Finland. Practical challenges come up because we have to produce different language versions and manage the whole process. People have to be told about things in different ways in different places. In some countries, personal communication is the only way to get things moving. In other countries, some other channels like the intranet work better. It is not easy. This is in fact why we are now building a network of local communicators. They can then tailor corporate messages to suit the local context. Our task is then rather to offer tools of different kinds and maybe external services and other means of support to further corporate goals.

What I have thought about a lot in my work particularly when communicating our strategy is the extent to which matters have to be localized and how much the localization leads to multiple understandings of corporate messages. It is a fact that the joint corporate language [English] can be used and understood in a variety of ways.



Challenges occur in disseminating corporate messages throughout the organization in the desired manner, in selecting the most suitable communication channels for different locations, and in making sure that messages are understood in the same way everywhere (cf. Appelbaum & Belmuth 2007).

Companies are clearly devoting effort to organizing their corporate communication function and processes to better manage their complex multicultural networks. The Communications Directors underlined the importance of doing things together:

[In multicultural corporate communication,] the question is not how I can do it properly; it's how we can make it work together.

Global networking in English will have a major effect on corporate communication. [...] We do not just drop the information somewhere and someone adopts it, but we build it together to a greater extent.

Doing things together is far from straightforward, since the cooperation partners come from many different cultural backgrounds. What is evidently needed in successful encounters across cultures is “a more nonjudgmental and tolerant frame of mind” (Bülow-Møller 2003, 77). As Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, 419) say, when language users “learn to know and appreciate a range of communication cultures, including their own, they will also learn to appreciate the need to be flexible. And if they become flexible, they will then have learned one of the most important skills needed in the rapidly changing business community of today.”

Such flexibility is ultimately needed when a company seeks to establish and maintain good relationships with its stakeholders and other interest groups. Good relationships translate into a favorable reputation (cf. Aula & Mantere 2006, 27–28). This had mainly been very well understood by the BBA informants, as exemplified below:

We had visitors from the [client's] European headquarters. They seemed like rather aggressive bossy types and they seemed to have a culture where they elbow their way forward. Even if our idea was to gain information so that we could provide better analyses, they appeared quite aggressive. We managed through discussing matters and getting back to unresolved issues later. The attitude was not a problem. It is important in our line of business that we serve our customers and in that case we have to be the flexible party. You cannot start getting back at people.

The call for flexibility, adaptability and tolerance was also strongly expressed by the Communications Directors interviewed. As one of them put it,

[W]hen cultures differ a lot, one cannot be arrogant. We have to remember that different cultures have different customs. How we operate in Finland may

not work at all in for example Russia. If we start international communication activities, we have to remember that they are not always Finland-based at all, procedures vary a lot.

In addition to the need to be flexible and tolerant in different cultural contexts, the Communications Directors also mentioned that skills in local languages facilitate localization processes. Based on data obtained from both BBAs and Communications Directors, it can be concluded that to better equip BBA students with cultural flexibility, adaptability and tolerance in multicultural communication, at least a rudimentary knowledge of the language of one's business partners is often the key toward deeper cultural understanding. From this perspective, English and other languages work in conjunction toward a better multicultural understanding (cf. House 2003, 574).

In sum, success in multicultural corporate communication is closely tied in with implementing strategic objectives, building international relationships, and ultimately managing the corporate reputation. In building relationships with different company internal and company external audiences by using English as the joint language, the organization of corporate communication requires rethinking and new types of expertise (cf. Pitkänen 2001, 167). The corporate communication function and processes should be built in such a way as to allow positive relationship building across cultural borders (Cf. Griffith 2002). Flexible, adaptable and tolerant joint corporate efforts and the acquisition of expert assistance whenever necessary help internationally operating companies to avert reputation risks.

### **5.3 Internal Communication in Multicultural Settings**

To continue the discussion of the multicultural corporate communication function and processes, attention will next be given to the key importance of internal communication. As Appelbaum and Belmuth point out, “without excellent internal communication across borders and cultures, it is difficult to execute a consistent and effective global message to external stakeholders. Since every global employee is a potential ambassador for a company's corporate message or brand, excellent internal communication is essential” (2007, 246) (cf. Aula & Heinonen 2002, 230). All in all, our data shows that even if the crucial role of internal communication in achieving corporate goals has been acknowledged, it is only relatively

recently that companies have started to develop, in practice, their processes of internal communication (cf. Argenti & Forman 2002, 139). This was underlined by all Communications Director informants working for large multinational companies:

Internal communication has not been a major focus earlier, but now this is changing. It is important to understand how strong the impact of internal communication is and how it can move the company toward the desired direction.

English is in a central role when it comes to multicultural internal communication, as it is commonly the operating language of companies working across national borders. A mere linguistic command of English and personal cultural adaptation skills do not, however, suffice. To guarantee multicultural success, each employee must also have a thorough understanding of how the company's internal communication function works and how one can make an impact on the multicultural internal communication processes.

To make the internal communication function and processes more manageable and effective internationally, it is a common practice in multicultural corporate communication to set up internal networks so that there are employees in charge of local communication in strategic places. All our informants discussed the use of such networks and the need to develop them. These networks can in today's digital environment be maintained in countless ways. In addition to using, for example, telephone, email, instant messaging, the intranet, video conferences and other company internal communication means and platforms, employees also often use the Internet with its various social media possibilities for internal communication. However, the informants also commonly pointed out the importance of meeting with people from different cultures face to face. Especially in multicultural settings, it is paramount that company representatives from different countries take time to meet regularly and get to know each other in person. This is the only way to create mutual trust, which, in turn, is a prerequisite for successful cooperation (cf. Appelbaum & Belmuth 2007, 248, 250, 254).

The Communications Directors reported a trend whereby companies are directing more and more resources to the creation and management of multicultural internal communication networks. According to our data, companies are increasingly establishing full-time jobs for the coordination of multicultural internal communication, while earlier the responsibilities were more dispersed and divided between employees whose main job was not necessarily related to communication at all. Such full-time positions enable a more systematic management of corporate messages, as there

are now more resources for their adaptation to the needs of each cultural environment. As internationalization often leads to profound corporate and organizational changes and those changes, in turn, to possible feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and distrust among employees (cf. e.g. Juholin 2001, 74; 122–123; Juholin 2008, 22–23; Puro 2004, 101–105; Mounter 2003, 268), it is profitable to have a well coordinated internal network of communication professionals whose job it is to try to alleviate the multicultural friction “through policies and initiatives encouraging two-way flows of learning, communication, and information” as Appelbum and Belmuth put it (2007, 245).

Even though the use of English as a joint language by and large makes internal communication easier and faster, many of our informants pointed out that making the most of the benefits of a single language necessitates special types of knowhow and holistic understanding. A common corporate language does not necessarily solve all the challenges of internal communication either. For example, internal documents must always be written in English even if there does not seem to be any immediate need for it. As one of the Communications Directors pointed out, such a need may always come later and one must be proactive to avoid doing the same thing twice. And as preparing internal materials in English may take time, the joint language policy may sometimes cause delays in communication processes. Another point often made in the interview data was that multinational companies may have a large number of employees who do not speak English and who cannot therefore be reached by the use of English.

Internal translations into several local languages are in fact often needed to localize internal corporate messages efficiently. Internal magazines and intranet sites, for example, are often provided in several local language versions in addition to English. Managing the use of English on the one hand and the need of translations and localization on the other is an important area of expertise for companies communicating multiculturally. Many of our informants explained that even if their company belongs to an international chain, there is a constant need to create and maintain active networks of internal communication in local languages. English is a great help, but not a comprehensive solution. One of the Communications Directors gave a practical example of the localization needs of an internationally operating company:

Our CEO decided to write a letter to our entire personnel regularly. The original letter is in English, which is our official corporate language. In some countries, the letter is translated into the local language and the translation is sent to the employees, sometimes even as a paper version, along with the original. In fact, in one bilingual country where our field workers move around a lot, we have a

system where they receive a message on their palmtop computers and they can then dial a number to listen to a translation of the letter in their mother tongue.

The example shows that sometimes the use of the local language is not the only thing to be considered. In addition, the channels of internal communication need to be carefully thought out. The company in question had come up with an innovative digital solution (the palmtop) and a very traditional solution (paper copies) to account for the different needs of the multicultural workforce.

Even though our BBA informants seldom feel that challenges arising from communication situations in English lead to multicultural corporate communication failure, the data shows that multicultural corporate communication problems often occur due to inadequate internal communication processes. As a typical example, employees may lack materials necessary for dealing with foreign customers, and individual employees need to produce tentative English versions of documents for sudden needs. In addition to resolving such acute cases, however, employees should also be able to analyze such situations and their importance with respect to corporate success. If there is a longer-perspective need for such materials, employees should try to make sure that linguistically and culturally appropriate versions of the necessary materials are produced for future needs. It is businesswise vital that communication challenges are resolved as quickly as possible. Our data revealed limitations in dealing with such challenges: individual employees may continuously find makeshift arrangements, instead of communicating the problems internally to obtain support.

A concrete example of the importance of efficient internal communication occurred in our data in a case where complex cultural information had to be exchanged within an organization in order for a multicultural project to proceed successfully between Finland and Belgium. Individual project participants first tried communicating via phone and e-mail to resolve timetabling problems that originated from different staff resources and different geographical distances in each country. When this was not successful, a face-to-face meeting was arranged. When even this was not enough for the project to continue successfully, our BBA informant suggested the following:

What we can do internally is to better communicate to our management how important this case is and what the problems are. [...] The Belgians should deal with the problems with our senior management.

The informant highlights a central issue linked to multicultural corporate communication skills: we need not only the ability to see when communication does not work properly across cultures, but also the ability to rise above a challenging situation and analyze it as a management problem that needs to be communicated to those in charge of the process. The same was also underlined by many of the Communications Directors: communication problems should not be allowed to persist for too long, but they should be resolved through managerial intervention if necessary.

In fact, such internal communication responsibilities should be seen as an integral part of each employee's work. This is especially important in multicultural settings. To develop a sense of having common goals and values across various cultural borders, each employee should be trained to take on responsibility for developing internal communication processes. As one of the Communications Directors highlighted:

Internal communication means a lot. Its importance for all functions should be emphasized. At all levels, each employee, not just the management, is responsible for internal communication.

If challenges in multicultural corporate communication emerge due to shortcomings in the management of internal communication processes, each employee should understand the effect of such challenges on corporate success and swiftly bring the matter into the attention of colleagues and managers. This responsibility should receive due emphasis during BBA studies.

## 5.4 Use of Team Support in Multicultural Settings

As a specific type of internal communication in multicultural settings, we now shift our focus to team communication and its role in promoting multicultural success. Multicultural tasks often take the form of projects carried out in teams. In the present data, challenges in multicultural corporate communication were frequently discussed in relation to teamwork in its various forms. Multicultural communication challenges often surface in connection with issues requiring complex and advanced forms of cooperation such as team management, project management, and the management of multilingual materials.<sup>10</sup> The need to improve team communication processes was often emphasized by informants. What makes

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<sup>10</sup> Different aspects of multicultural project and team management are discussed by e.g. Mäkilouko (2004), Osland & al. (2004), DeSanctis & Jiang (2005), Zwikaël & al. (2005), Behfar & al. (2006), and Gwynne (2009).

multicultural team communication difficult has to do with such extensively researched multicultural issues as national stereotyping, attitudes toward confrontation, the concept of time, norms of politeness, the patterns of interaction, conceptions of hierarchy, conceptions of quality, non-verbal communication, cultural taboos, and so on.

As Goby (2007, 427) points out, much of the existing research in cross-cultural communication “rests on the frameworks of cultural analysis developed by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001).” These scholars discuss and attempt to categorize the various culturally bound differences, inclinations and expectations that have a direct bearing on people’s communicative behavior in multicultural settings.<sup>11</sup> The focus on cultural differences is relevant when exploring the communication challenges occurring in multicultural teams, and it is clear that one needs to know well the cultural background variables of one’s colleagues and cooperation partners. The main emphasis in this paper, however, will not be on specific cultures or their differing dimensions as such. Instead, we approach teamwork from a different, more general, angle. In this paper, efficient cooperation in and between teams is seen as an in-house support system for navigating through multicultural corporate communication challenges. In what follows, we discuss a few selected examples of the practical ways in which multicultural expertise can be successfully shared in teams (both national and multinational).

The BBA informants reported that they commonly use the support and expertise of their team members and other colleagues in solving challenges, as the following example shows:

I am not an expert in all kinds of content and there can be problems in expressing things in English, in finding the suitable wording. These things have to be checked with someone who knows the content to see whether there is a certain established concept or whether a direct translation can be used. With larger assignments, I always book a time with someone who can check things together with me.

Some of the informants also had the opportunity to use in-house translators in situations like this. The point here is that in terms of practical efficiency and good end results, it is often better to turn to an expert

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, Hall draws a distinction between high-context and low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, communication is less explicit and includes less written and formal information, whereas in low-context cultures, communication involves more clear-cut explanations and more information is stated explicitly. In Hofstede’s work, national cultural differences are approached on the basis of five dimensions: small vs. large power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, weak vs. strong uncertainty avoidance and long vs. short term orientation. For more on these, see Hall (1976), Hofstede (1991/1994, 2001) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005).

close by than to go through extensive materials to resolve the situation alone. The informant above has clearly realized that in specific challenges, individual guess work is not an efficient option and team effort is required.

Team support is often needed for specialized communication in English, and it is also called for when there is an unexpected need to produce or interpret texts in other languages:

Interpreting special documents is really difficult, language skills are really needed. We often go through everybody's skills to find someone who can speak the language. In the end, it always works, this is a large organization and we can always phone different departments to find someone. My closest colleague has studied French and Italian and some Spanish and I know German and Swedish. So, we have a nice combination.

As it is usually hard for any one person to have an equally strong command of several languages, employees resort to the expertise of their team members to complement their own skills.

Quite often in the informants' comments, the effect of culture on corporate communication was dealt with from the viewpoint of national cultures. Ladegaard (2007, 159–160), for example, discusses the role of national stereotyping and concludes that “employees use (stereotypes of) national cultures to provide direction and orientation when they engage in global communication.” Our BBA informants reported a number of communication situations in which they were irritated and frustrated by what they quite uncritically took as common characteristics of given national cultures. Sometimes the situations were commented on quite arrogantly, as this very basic example demonstrates:

In our job we have schedules that we have to stick to. The worst thing of all is to do things together with people from Spain and Italy. They never produce the goods, it is always 'mañana'. When we inform these team members about the timetables, we always put in an extra week for them, because it's hopeless.

The informant clearly draws on the stereotypical relaxed attitude toward timetables in some parts of southern Europe. The extreme word choices (“worst”, “never”, “always”) underline the Finnish BBA informant's frustration and a certain blindness to the stereotype. The positive aspect here is that a practical success strategy to solve the problem has ultimately been found: the Nordic team members reserve more time for cooperation with colleagues from the South. However, no clear attempt has been made toward negotiating a mutual understanding of the situation. Moreover,



the Finnish informant here views his/her own culturally determined time conception uncritically.<sup>12</sup>

As Schneider and Barsoux (2003, 13) point out, addressing cultural differences and stereotypes is often seen as a source of conflict, which is why they are not discussed at all. In the corporate world, this can be an obstacle to fulfilling corporate goals. As Schneider and Barsoux point out, “if cultural differences cannot be discussed then they cannot be managed—neither to avoid misunderstandings nor to develop productive synergies.” A certain lack of courage related to discussing and negotiating cultural misunderstandings can be detected throughout the data. What makes such open discussions challenging are, of course, precisely the various culture specific patterns of thinking, speaking and interacting mentioned above. It is by no means easy to find a way to be constructively ‘open’ in a multicultural team situation.

Before attempting open discussions of communication challenges, it is crucial to familiarize oneself with the cultural backgrounds of the interactants to avoid gross cultural mistakes. Our informants report that they frequently make use of the cultural knowledge and expertise of those colleagues who have more experience in the cultural background in question. Sometimes team members divide responsibilities in such a way that each focuses on a specific cultural area and information is then shared. One of the Communications Directors demonstrated this phenomenon as follows:

In our team, for example, there is a person who has worked with the biggest and best North American brands. This person brings both tools and vision into handling and doing things. The tools and vision are really made use of. This is very much teamwork, we sit together all the time and do things together, we have an open office. Thoughts are shared, and we make use of them through talking all the time. We do not even need any separate processes or tools for sharing information, because the information and those processes are here all the time. It becomes concrete, because our work means doing, creating and thinking about things together.

The example underlines the need to focus on the effect of an open and trusting corporate culture, organizational culture, and professional culture

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<sup>12</sup> Such an attitude can be linked to the so called self-reference criterion: “[a]ll people have a self-reference criterion (SRC). The SRC assumes that one’s own behaviour is natural, logical, and correct. Different behaviour is typically judged to be inappropriate, inferior, and ineffective. For example, a person from a monochronic time orientation, where time is seen as a limited commodity and being on time is valued, will view a person from a polychronic time orientation, where time is seen as cyclical and unlimited, as uncaring, inefficient, or even lazy.” (Varner & Palmer 2005; original definition by Lee 1966.)

on successful corporate communication.<sup>13</sup> To be successful, the overall attitude toward team support must be positive, and the skills related to asking for help, sharing knowledge and giving and receiving feedback must be generally valued by the team members.

The communication culture of an organization, however, may not always support fruitful knowledge sharing activities between teams or even between members of one team, as explained by one of the BBA informants:

There are some older employees who have not studied languages too much. They send quotations and other messages to international clients in English by e-mail. To my horror, I have seen them send messages with really rude word choices, which of course are not intended to be rude. These messages should go through many filters first.

The younger employee, although well equipped in language skills and with a developed understanding of the function and processes of corporate communication, does not feel that s/he is able to interfere when s/he sees a colleague in need of help. In the context of multicultural corporate communication, it is very important to be able to create a communication culture supportive of team effort. The attitude towards communication needs to be open and development oriented. Pedagogically speaking, BBAs need to be well trained in giving and receiving support and feedback whenever corporate interests require them to do so. Such team skills need to be exercised and tested in practice; they do not come naturally. Put in Argenti and Forman's (2002, 4) terms, employees need to possess both the courage and the skills to improve corporate communication *processes* as well as the overall *attitude* toward communication or the "*set of mental habits* that employees internalize". This is the only way to improve the communication *products* and, ultimately, to better further the corporate goals. (cf. Aula & Mantere 2006, 99–100).

At times, communicating in one's own English or any other language with all its strengths and weaknesses is enough, especially when support from colleagues, team members and other sources is available. However, as seen above, sometimes employees may approach, for instance, customers without sufficient consideration for the quality of English required by the situation. In terms of corporate reputation and success, linguistically

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<sup>13</sup> Poncini (2003, 75), for example, considers "it important to take into account certain aspects of the business context and not just the national cultural backgrounds of interactants in intercultural business settings." Bülow-Møller (2003, 84–5) is in fact of the opinion that what Hofstede (1991/1994) refers to as "professional culture" is "the most salient factor" in many business transactions. In practice, however, drawing a distinction between the effects of national, corporate or professional culture on communication is difficult. The variables that are exactly at play in any given situation are difficult to decipher; "it is extremely hard to pin down which part of the large number of group memberships is salient at any given time" (Bülow-Møller 2003, 77).

or stylistically inappropriate communication may lead to considerable credibility problems in the eyes of customers or other important interest groups. One important facet linked to BBAs' skills, therefore, is the ability to analyze communication situations from the perspective of overall corporate reputation and to seek external help when needed.

## 5.5 Service Acquisition for Multicultural Communication Purposes

When in-house support for multicultural corporate communication is not sufficient, there is a need to procure services from external service providers, especially when it comes to external corporate communication. The more international the operations of a company are, the more demanding are also the tasks of acquiring and managing various expert communication services world wide.

There is a variety of corporate situations in which it is crucial that material produced in, for example, English is linguistically, stylistically and visually appropriate and of high quality. What is more, regulations often vary between countries, and this has a direct bearing on the decisions about appropriate language and style of corporate materials (cf. Appelbaum & Belmuth 207, 254). The interview data is in accordance with Nickerson's (2003, 78) view that in certain areas of international corporate communication (such as advertising texts, television commercials, job advertisements and annual reports) there is a need for "a reassessment of the effectiveness of using English without due consideration" and for "renewed calls for appropriate language training." BBAs involved in multicultural external communication should be able to pinpoint such situations and manage the acquisition and use of expert services.

It is often argued in literature linked to English in global corporate use that the skills of a native English speaker should not be used as the model for foreign language learners and nonnative users of English (cf. e.g. Seidlhofer 2001, Cook 2005). This is true to a certain point, but there are situations, especially related to external communication, in which the established standards of the native speaker model must be adopted as a yardstick for corporate communication material. In cases crucial to corporate reputation, we need some existing standard to ensure communicative and business success. If the standard is not met, the outcome may not be as desired, as one of the Communications Directors pointed out:

Time and occasion permitting, we always use translators. Our own translations can be used for internal communication, but preferably not for external communication. If a document is written in broken 'tourist English', it may not be appreciated at the other end. The silliness of the English may override the actual issue. We want all our external communication in English to be of high quality, which is a bit of a challenge...

There are several crucial points to comment on here. First of all, the informant has clearly understood the need for appropriate high-quality communication products. Secondly, the phrase "time and occasion permitting" underlines the perpetual shortage of time in multicultural corporate communication. It is a typical problem that companies do not reserve enough time for the preparation of high-quality messages geared to global audiences. Translation, if carried out by experts, is not a mechanical activity which can be done just like that and in no time at all. Proper high-quality translation is far from mechanical, and requires a lot of creativity and fine-tuning to be successful. The fulfillment of corporate goals may also easily fail if translation is done, for example, too literally, using too formal a style, or without sufficient attention to cultural and other nuances.

This brings us to an area of multicultural corporate communication that, according to our informants, does not always appear to be properly managed in companies: localizing messages. As Ballance (2006, 54) points out, "successful multicultural communication is more than just translating existing material [...]. Effective multicultural communication must embrace the social nuance of separate markets." Both the Communications Directors and the BBA informants mention that companies rather too often rely on simple translations (and even demand word-for-word translations) when producing messages for multicultural audiences. Translating messages into high-quality language is not always enough; the messages themselves also need to be presented in an appropriate manner, as stressed by one of our BBA informants:

Our policy is that no matter how good your school English is, we do not produce printed material in English. We have external, native, English writers for everything. All our material is produced directly in the language of the customer. We do not use direct translations.

In Finland mistakes are made when people do not study the target market; material may include annoying aspects or other problems that people react to in the target area and ask what this is all about. [...] Advertising and marketing agencies produce things that just look good and then translate the message. It is not the way to do things: the message, too, has to be localized together with everything else. Localizing the message is important; otherwise the whole thing may easily be unsuccessful. When creating customer relationships, the work has to be carried out properly.

The interview data suggests that even if the need to localize messages and tailor campaigns according to the needs of local audiences is understood on a theoretical level, the job is not necessarily carried out in practice because of tight timetables and limited budgets. In such situations, choosing a skilled and knowledgeable translator, familiar with the company's affairs and business environment, can be at least a partial solution. Appelbaum and Belmuth suggest that, for example, in the case of official documents "it is best for the translation to be done in the countries where they will be used" and if the materials are intended for the local media, the translation should be done by "someone familiar with local media usage and language" (2007, 247). In the same way, the local agencies are often the best experts on the visual features of messages: images, colours, fonts, and the like. The need for linguistic and visual appropriateness in all strategically crucial corporate contexts is something that communicators should be well aware of and they should be able to acquire translation, localization, and other communication services accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

The acquisition of services and building of successful networks and partnerships is an important competence area of its own within multicultural corporate communications: employees should be able to acknowledge their limitations and to successfully obtain services when need be. Many of the Communications Directors stressed the importance of service acquisition knowhow:

Especially in the international context, the external service provider should be involved in the process as soon as decisions on visions and objectives have been made. [...] If you decide to invest in expert services in multicultural corporate communication, you should make the most of them from the very beginning, involve the service provider right from the start. [...] The customer is responsible for choosing a partner suitable for its own goals. [...] It is necessary to develop partnership thinking, the idea of doing things together. And to create mutual trust.

When operating internationally, companies often use the services of advertising and communications agencies that belong to global chains, for these can provide a good balance of centralized and local services according to the needs of the company. However, many informants also point out that in addition to such global groups, it is also sometimes necessary to identify and use independent local service providers who can best "address specific needs in a market" as Appelbaum and Belmuth put it (2007, 261).

Trust building between the different cooperation partners in multicultural contexts was emphasized by practically all of the Communica-

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<sup>14</sup> Janssens & al. (2004) also address the issue in their discussion of the key role of the translator in the production of culturally mediated corporate communication.

tions Directors in our data, as were the great many challenges involved in doing so. Companies may invest quite heavily in, for instance, translation and localization services or the services of a local communications or advertising agency, but the results may suffer without sufficient knowhow in developing the customer relationship. Successful end results require efficient communication between the company representatives and the providers of multicultural communication services, ranging from corporate strategy and values all the way to, for example, specialized terminology in English or other languages. Many of our informants point out that deciding even such a micro-level language issue as to which terms to use in a company's communication materials often necessitates careful negotiation across cultures between various internal specialists (from top to floor positions) and the external service providers.

According to the Communications Directors, a successful relationship between the client and the service provider is, however, first and foremost based on an open discussion of the business models and principles of profit generation of both partners. Problems often occur if the roles and interests of the parties concerned are not clearly defined. The companies procuring external services may feel that the agencies exaggerate their own role, while the agencies may feel that their clients do not make the most of the agencies' potential. This problem is particularly pressing in multicultural contexts, as services geared to international purposes are often much more expensive than those intended for national purposes only. A thorough discussion about the needs and possibilities, as well as the cost, of multicultural communication services is crucial at the very beginning to avoid problems at a later stage. Training offered to future BBAs should give due attention to such key principles of acquiring services for multicultural purposes. As the acquisition of communication services is a demanding task even in national contexts, it is clear that the knowhow required by the procurement and management of external communication services in multicultural contexts is even more so (cf. Griffith 2002, 263–264).

In the end, service acquisition and management is, of course, carried out between employees with varying roles and interests. This is why the position of those in charge of the cooperation is important. The representatives of the communications agencies emphasized that the persons making procurement decisions need to know enough about multicultural corporate communication. Problems occur if they are not sufficiently familiar with the overall role and function of the services procured:

In large international companies, communications services may be part of centralized procurement operations. They may have an international procurement

manager who procures anything ranging from nuts and bolts to communication services. Such a manager does not often really even know what he or she is procuring and, on top of things, the procurement takes place abroad.

According to the Communications Directors, the persons procuring services must be in the position to make strategic decisions or at least the internal communication processes between top management, the corporate communication function, and the person acquiring the services must be in a good shape to guarantee efficient decision making.

All the Communications Directors in the data reported that the crucial link between corporate strategy and corporate communication is better and better understood in companies today, largely thanks to the increasing internationalization of operations, which, in turn, has led to intensified corporate communication needs. However, this heightened understanding and the practical corporate and organizational knowhow and processes built up on its basis are something that communication professionals must constantly cherish and develop further. BBAs should therefore be trained not only for acquiring external services but also for monitoring the quality of the services acquired – and ultimately the quality of the multicultural corporate communication system as a whole.

## 5.6 Quality Control for Multicultural Corporate Communication

In this section, we discuss the importance of measuring the success of multicultural corporate communication. As Appelbaum and Belmuth point out, various measuring activities are “an essential aspect of any global communication strategy” if a company wants to “improve its success at delivering effective messages and achieving corporate communication goals” (2007, 261, 262). According to van Riel and Fombrun, the measuring efforts in corporate communication involve “creating protocols describing both the procedures applied and the success criteria used.” The purpose of this is to “demonstrate the effects of corporate communication on building a favorable reputation for the entire organization” and to illustrate “the added value of corporate communication for the company” (2007, 35, 34).<sup>15</sup> Examples of the ways to measure communication success in practice

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<sup>15</sup> Aula and Heinonen (2002) and Aula and Mantere (2006) go quite far in their discussion of the need to manage reputation and to measure the quality of a company’s activities geared to reputation building. Even if they acknowledge the complexity of the task of managing corporate reputation in the first place, they suggest that companies should pay careful attention to creating suitable reputation strategies.

include, for example, carefully targeted feedback and evaluation forms, feedback sessions, focus group interviews, opinion surveys, and global media analyses (cf. Appelbaum & Belmuth 2007, 261–262).

The need to monitor and develop communication processes and success was well understood by many of our informants, even if the actual systems for doing so were not necessarily so very well thought out or implemented yet in their international organizations. Some companies included in the data, however, made use of comprehensive quality systems into which communication issues were incorporated. One of our BBA informants describes such a system as follows:

We have a common performance management process and a knowledge management system. In Finland we have not made the best possible use of them yet. All countries and units have part-time knowledge managers, who have a network and who share information. The managers are in contact with our global office and pass on the information to us. We can inform our local managers about any feedback or needs, for example related to communication, and they can then forward the information.

Even if the common management systems referred to in this example are not devoted to communication as such, the informant saw them as good channels to give feedback and influence the ways in which communication issues can be developed on a global scale.

Many of the informants pointed out the challenges posed to common quality systems by multiculturalism. It is demanding to build a communication system with functioning success measurement criteria across cultures because the entire understanding of the concept of corporate communication, in the first place, may differ considerably between countries and offices. The low-hierarchy model based on interaction, cooperation and mutual support generally valued by all our Finnish informants, for example, cannot necessarily be implemented at all in the same way in countries where strict value hierarchies are important. Any standardized feedback or evaluation forms, for example, do not work in such cases, as the employees may approach the questions concerning communication from widely diverging perspectives.

Even if a general consensus about multicultural corporate communication and its success criteria were to be found, the organizational challenges related to defining and developing communication processes across borders often stand in the way of effective quality control, as exemplified by the following comment by one of the BBA informants:

The centralized department in charge of corporate communication could take a more active role and be more open about its operations and processes. They do something in London, but I don't really know what is done there and by whom.



In a multicultural context, the definition and description of both communication processes and their success criteria require a great deal of time and effort. The communication professionals from all the cultural backgrounds concerned must therefore take an active and leading role in the building and implementation of a quality control system that all parts of the company can understand, accept, and successfully apply.

# 6

## Summary of Findings

■ As exemplified above, individual multicultural corporate communication knowhow is a prerequisite in today's business life, and employees thus need:

- linguistic skills (strong English skills but also skills in other languages)
- cultural awareness and sensitivity (often acquired through cultural training and experience as well as a knowledge of languages other than English)
- creativity, flexibility and adaptability in finding practical ways to succeed in business encounters despite cultural multiplicity.

As also emphasized above, multicultural corporate communication is a team effort, for the reality is that one cannot succeed in doing everything for every purpose by oneself. Ultimately, then, the success or failure of multicultural corporate communication depends on how well corporate communication is understood and organized as a whole. Individuals with even relatively limited linguistic and cultural skills may nevertheless cope well and fulfill corporate goals fruitfully through the efficient use of various corporate and organizational support networks. In the light of interview data from Finnish BBA graduates and Communications Directors, successful multicultural corporate communication also calls for:

- an ability to see the big corporate picture and the necessity of appropriate communication in view of corporate reputation
- an understanding of how the organization and management of corporate communication as a whole affect corporate success
- skills in information acquisition, teamwork and other internal networking for obtaining support
- an understanding of the internal communication responsibility of each employee when it comes to solving problems in multicultural communication and reputation management
- an ability to recognize one's limits and to procure and make good use of external expert services when necessary

- an understanding of the importance of quality control linked to multicultural corporate communication.

Even though many of these areas are already explicitly or implicitly integrated in BBA education, their interrelations may not always be clear to the students: the success of not only an individual but also that of an entire organization may be dependent on any and all of these issues. BBA students need to learn to see multicultural corporate communication as an integrated whole involving linguistic, cultural, corporate and organizational knowhow. Disregarding any of the components is not an option; the students must be familiar with the whole package.

Although the interviews with the BBAs and Communications Directors often yielded similar points, there were also certain differences in the perspectives expressed. Generally speaking, given the different roles of the two informant groups, Communications Directors more commonly viewed multicultural corporate communication from a strategic perspective, bringing up higher-scale challenges relating to multicultural strategy implementation. The BBAs, on the other hand, approached communication challenges and successes more often from a workaday angle, highlighting many practical challenges and their solutions. The different perspectives complemented each other and provided a useful cross-section of corporate realities.

As concerns language and culture skills, the BBA informants were typically quite confident of coping in challenging situations, as they felt that their basic skills are relatively good and that support is available through different channels. The BBAs stated that it is especially during the early stages of one's career that difficulties may be experienced in adjusting to working across cultures, but when one learns to overcome the uncertainty linked to multicultural situations, communication works quite well indeed. The Communications Directors were generally more worried about the level of linguistic and cultural knowhow. In this respect, their concern was over the reputation risks linked to challenging multicultural corporate communication situations. The Communications Directors were also slightly more sensitive than the BBAs when it comes to acknowledging cultural differences and their effect on communication practices and processes. While some of the BBA informants were highly aware of the need to adapt communication practices and processes with an eye on cultural differences, some others still exhibited a somewhat lower degree of cultural sensitivity and adaptability and certain blind spots in cultural knowhow. This was exemplified, for example, by frustration when communication practices by other nationalities did not follow the same

principles that Finns are used to. All in all, however, the links between good communication, good service, good relationships, and good corporate reputation were clearly understood by the BBA informants as well.

Both Communications Directors and BBAs highlighted the importance of team support and doing things together and presented examples of how knowledge is usefully shared in order to achieve corporate goals. Some of the BBA informants' comments, however, also showed that the corporate and organizational cultures or the feedback and support systems of companies may not always be developed enough to allow the efficient use of employee knowhow. While younger employees with relatively recent BBA studies would be able to improve the quality of daily multicultural corporate communication at the companies they work for, the environment may not be open enough to allow this.

The role of multicultural sensitization was brought up by both informant groups: multicultural competence improves with multicultural experience. The BBA informants saw that while courses linked to developing multicultural corporate communication skills may provide a useful starting point, it is through firsthand international experience in the form of student exchange and work placements abroad that one acquires a more thorough understanding of what it takes to operate in multicultural environments. Similar comments were made by the Communications Directors, who often cited international work rotation or close cooperation with colleagues from abroad as useful means of developing multicultural corporate communication knowhow.

As sophisticated multicultural corporate communication knowhow and processes are the central means towards successful business operations, companies must be aware of the different kinds of multicultural corporate communication knowhow that they possess and of the kind of knowhow they need. The multicultural corporate communication processes in general, and the processes related to using various company internal and company external support measures in particular, must be constantly developed. Problems affecting multicultural corporate communication must be addressed promptly and with skill to support corporate goals and corporate reputation. Finally, the quality of multicultural corporate communication must be monitored and measured regularly, despite the difficulties involved in establishing common success criteria that all parts of a multicultural organization can accept and use. It is important that all this is taken well into account in BBA training, so that when entering working life, the younger generations bring with them a holistic understanding of the needs and practices of successful multicultural corporate communication.

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