

**INTERNET INTERNATIONAL©
A SIMULATION EXERCISE FOR UNDERSTANDING
TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION & CUSTOMER SERVICE
IN A RAPIDLY GROWING INTERNET SERVER COMPANY**

or

Customer Service? A Cultural Dilemma of Human Interaction Versus Labor Costs

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ABSTRACT

In the current global economy, managers must deal with employees and customers from a variety of geographical locations. The purpose of this paper and the presentation is to introduce a simulation called Internet International©. This case simulation is designed to ease the transition of both students and managers by helping build the skills, sensitivity, and cultural awareness they need to establish and maintain effectiveness when doing business across national borders (Trompenaars, 1994).

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a shared system of meanings and groups of people with common culture have established norms, values, and beliefs that guide their behavior (Hofstede, 1980). People vary along these cultural dimensions and orientations from a national standpoint. This exercise focuses on understanding the macro-level national dimensions of universalism versus particularism, individualism versus collectivism, specific versus diffuse, achievement versus ascription, internal versus external control, neutral versus emotional, and people versus task orientations. However, there may also be regional, occupational, and corporate values and beliefs which can support or undermine national tendencies. Through active participation in this simulated exercise, participants will focus on understanding the macro-level national dimensions of culture that affect individuals and their work.

INTERNET INTERNATIONAL©

Internet International© is an exercise designed for as few as five participants, but can also be used for larger groups divided into five groups or teams. Conversely, multiple groups of five participants each may run concurrently. It takes approximately ninety minutes to play and debrief, but can be played in two fifty minute sessions as well.

The objective of the Internet International© exercise is for participants to come to an agreement on how to introduce a corporate-wide costs-cutting strategy. Ideally, this simulation demonstrates how organizational leaders must find adaptive corporate cultures that balance the needs of multi-cultural customers with short-term shareholder returns on investment. Cultural diversity influences consumers' perception of quality service as well as shareholders' expectations. Customer service decisions, such as the integration of "caller waiting" systems as labor saving strategies, may create seemingly opposing, and culturally influenced, expectations at the point of company-customer contact.

Innovations do not always have to lead to misunderstandings and problems; they can also create opportunity for gaining competitive advantage. This exercise is intended to demonstrate the value of reconciling the costs-quality dilemma in multi-cultural customer service delivery. The learning method for resolving this dilemma is outlined in the three steps described below.

Step One

Participants are introduced to the company, Internet International (II), a large U.S.-based international firm that specializes in providing computer user access to the internet. The company has grown at an extremely fast pace and operates as a multinational enterprise with subsidiaries in the major regions of the world. However, the company's financial performance has recently suffered as the costs of operating this high tech service organization have continued to increase with global expansion.

Participants receive a memo that they will attend an important planning meeting to discuss the introduction of a new technology system at the company. Attached is It's seven-point policy for implementing change. At this point, each participant (or team) is assigned to play one of five National General Managers and is given a Cultural Role-Brief which describes several culture-specific dimensions that must be integrated into his/her attitude as well as appropriate rules for change, strategy for leading change, and the individual's response to the memo and change policy.

Step Two

The planning meeting will take about one hour at the end of which participants must present an outline of a mutually acceptable plan for implementing the system. The group must produce a statement of the purpose and objectives of the new service, anticipated reactions from customers, a description of the implementation process, and recommendations regarding staff reduction. Each is expected to make a useful contribution and help the group reach its decisions by contributing their ideas on all topics. Participants have 15 minutes to individually prepare.

The group can decide how the meeting may best be conducted, but decisions should be reached by reconciling critical cultural dilemmas that may

surface during discussions. The reconciliation process must be used to assure that the expectations of customers and employees (stakeholders), as well as the company's board of directors (shareholders), have been integrated into the new cultural design for service delivery. Due to the nature of the company's product and services, it is important that all innovations and improvements be globally applied – the implementation process must be the same in all operating locations. Participants have one hour to conduct their meeting and discussion.

Debriefing Session

The nature and length of the debriefing session may vary depending on the purpose of using the exercise. The authors have most often used it in graduate and undergraduate strategic management and policy classes, where the debriefing session highlighted issues related to cross-cultural issues in decision-making, quality and service. Students are often surprised at how strongly their assumed cultural beliefs and attitudes influence their role during the planning process, and the changes in their behavior under these conditions.

Some other general themes that could be explored and developed in the exercise include issues of cross-cultural negotiations, and human resources, power, control, implementation, and functional-level strategy making.

REFERENCES

- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Trompenaars, F. (1994). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*. Chicago: Irwin.
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