

WHEN CORPORATIONS COLLIDE: INFORMATION OVERLOAD

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ABSTRACT

Technological advances have facilitated global corporate mergers and acquisitions as never before; but despite the seemingly borderless economic advantages perpetrated by the digital age, an information overload upon unsuspecting acquired employees often results in human culture shock. In a corporate environment, differences in foreign ownership, nationalities, and global management practices are often sources of contradiction, conflict, and polarizing taboos resulting from a proliferation of policy and procedural changes, communications, directives, organizational charts, meetings, and training that distract and deter concentration and decision-making. This study explored the national cultural influence an international French parent company effected upon the organizational culture of its American subsidiary; and then observed the subsequent global influence, power, and control that an elephantine U.S. acquiring company effected upon both companies. Findings indicated that the cultural influences imposed by each mature parent company upon the weaker nascent organizational culture of its American subsidiary resulted in a double paralytic culture shock that short-circuited the U.S. subsidiary's effectiveness and growth. Unique to this qualitative inquiry was the implementation of agile ethnography, an interactive flexible participant-observation methodology bounded by time, access, and the workplace environment.

Keywords: Acculturation, Cultural Relativism, Culture Shock, Ethnocentrism, Information Overload, National, Occupational, Organizational Culture

INTRODUCTION

In today's technological and highly competitive global economies, foreign ownership of United States (U.S.) companies is more prevalent than ever. In order to comply with U.S. Federal statutes, regulations, executive orders, and treaties regarding trade, many foreign companies have incorporated their business interests in the U.S. as wholly-owned subsidiary companies by establishing appropriate firewalls, such as separate Boards of Directors, accounting, finance, purchasing, and information technology systems, among others, to prevent undue control and influence from foreign ownership. Despite the firewalls, Hofstede [36, p. 535] argued that interaction between the entities still occurs and that "as more organizations are crossing national borders, differences in nationality are increasingly a source of conflicts and contradictions. . . . related to the unconsciously different paradigms in our minds which we have all inherited because of the country in which we are born and raised." Making the point that national and organizational cultures are infinitely connected, Hofstede [36, p. 531] asserted that: "Organizations are not culture-free. . . . The causality between institutions and culture is circular: they cannot be separated."

Ease of travel, access to technology and communications media coupled with vast international organization acquisitions and mergers have contributed to widespread intercultural encounters [39]. Multinational group meetings, interdepartmental dynamics, seminars, video conference calls, shared workspaces, email, skyping, social media, and business travel, among other situations result in a bombardment of hard copy, virtual, and sensory information that often evokes unintended cultural conflicts. An important by-product of corporate acquisitions is the information overload [61; 62] that ensues from the acquirer to the acquired in the proliferation and dissemination of new policy and procedural communications, directives, organizational charts, meetings, compliance, ethics, and IT training, language, vocabulary, acronyms, business practices, and mission statements that distract and deter concentration from work products and decision-making. At times, technologies also collide with institutions and their deeply ingrained cultural assumptions [4]. Consequently the stress, anxiety, conflicts and multicultural frustrations caused by an unfamiliar information assault to the senses produced the phenomenon known as culture shock [46].

Foreign parent companies have the ability and the opportunity to communicate and impose their national cultures and identities upon the organizational cultures of its subsidiaries by overtly and tacitly influencing the firms' social

behavior and decision-making processes [37]. A common management problem is the failure to recognize and capitalize on these cultural differences; resulting in lost opportunities for technological advancement, group situational learning, new ideas and innovations, and corporate economic growth. “The lack of universal solutions to [business] problems does not mean that countries cannot learn from each other. On the contrary looking across the border is one of the most effective ways of getting new ideas for management, organization, or politics” [39, p. 340]. The dilemma for the acquiring organization is whether to adapt to the local culture or try to change it.” And herein lies the crux of this study. *How does an acquiring entity, foreign or domestic, seamlessly marry two or multiple business cultures into one?* In this specific case, the primary means of foreign or domestic large business integration manifested itself in the acquirer’s speedy and relentless assault of electronic and written data, meetings, trainings, and other sensory information upon the acquired.

From the perspective of a U.S. entity, this study explored the national cultural influence an international French parent company effected upon the organizational culture of its American subsidiary; and then observed the subsequent global influence, power, and control that an elephantine U.S. acquiring company effected upon both companies. This research provided an opportunity to learn how these cultural differences impacted the American business’ social behavior and decision-making processes; to observe and report descriptive data relating to group communicative practices and interactions; and to record the influence and perceptions of national and global cultures upon a U.S. organizational culture. Hofstede [34, p. 47] proffered this rationale: “The task of cross-cultural organization research is to broaden the data bases available to researchers and their awareness of value systems different from their own.” Findings indicated that the cultural influences imposed by each mature parent company upon the weaker nascent organizational culture of its American subsidiary resulted in a *double* paralytic culture shock that short-circuited the U.S. subsidiary’s effectiveness and growth.

Expanding upon the organizational management theories of Toffler, Beninger, Oberg, Hofstede, Hall, Schein, Hooker, Kunda, and Ferraro; and the cultural research of anthropologists and other social scientists, this study described the influences of information overload heaped upon an acquired company *twice*, demonstrating that technological and social consequences can be negative, as well as positive. This essay synthesizes the research questions, literature review, methodology, results, and interpretations comprising the subject matter of a formal doctoral dissertation [10]. Therefore, it is important to note that additional findings were identified and fully detailed in the original manuscript [10] such as the cultural influences on American occupations, business meetings, departmental group dynamics; the impact on an engineer-centric environment; and the identification of the Support Groups occupational subculture. However, for the purposes of this paper, the impact of informational culture shock upon a U.S. subsidiary corporation is the singular focus and primary finding described.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linking Culture to Information (Beninger’s and Hofstede’s Theories)

In his book, *The Control Revolution*, Beninger [5, p. 63] directly linked the study of cultural groups (identified as Level Two) within his “Time Line of the Development of Four Levels of Control,” summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Time Line of the Development of Four Levels of Control [5, p. 63]

| Years Ago (Logarithmic) | Level | Formation of the Earth |
|-------------------------|------------|--|
| 1 Billion | One | Life (Molecular Programming) |
| 100 Million | Two | Culture; Homo Sapiens (Learning by Imitation; Teaching) |
| 10 Thousand | Three | Bureaucracy (Agriculture; Commercial; Industrial Revolution) |
| 100 Years | Four | Technology (Control Revolution) |

Beniger [5, p. 76] argued that “cultural programming . . . arose from the need to process *social* information . . . dependent on reciprocal communication . . . and essential to the intersection of information and communications.” Beniger [5; 6] further asserted that control results from cultural rituals, such as language, music, drama, heroes, and symbols, and from an anthropological perspective he confirmed his social control theory by citing several detailed passages from ethnographies performed by Malinowski, Rappaport, Kroeber, Kluckhohn, Geertz, Goffman, and Lévi-Strauss. This nexus of information and communications that converges and intersects to form the cultural and structural anthropology of social systems is illustrated in Figure 1.

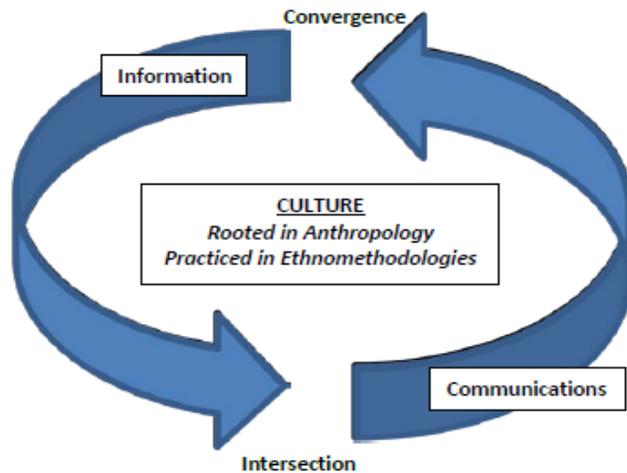


Figure 1. *The Circular Cultural Convergence of Information and Communications*

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov [39, p. 5-6] referred to culture metaphorically as “software of the mind . . . a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment where it was learned.” However, Hofstede [30, p. 536] further asserted a contrary position that at times corporate management considers “the influence of nationality on organization theories somewhat taboo as a subject . . . polarizing . . . and threatening.” Hall [29, p. 25] added that, “Culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual. When anthropologists stress this point they are usually ignored, for they are challenging the deepest popular American beliefs about ourselves as well as foreigners. They lead people to see things they might not want to see.”

Known for his theorizing of national cultural dimensions, Hofstede’s [36, p. 527] article entitled, “An American in Paris: The Influence of Nationality on Organization Theories,” focused attention on the ever present “culture clash between American and French thinking.” Hofstede utilized the metaphor of American composer, George Gershwin’s 1928 symphonic tone poem entitled, “An American in Paris,” by comparing the frame of a musical composition to reflect a foreign visitor’s homesickness for America. Hofstede [p. 525] described Gershwin’s three movements as “Euphoria,” the exhilaration upon one’s arrival; “Distress,” the culture shock resulting from the difficulty to adapt to new surroundings; and “Adaptation,” the acculturation that takes place after one inures to the new environment and accepts and embraces the differences, as well as, the similarities to one’s own homeland. Hofstede [p. 527] further argued that this culture clash has always existed in business organizations as “neither side seems to be aware that the other speaks from a different context.” Hofstede [p. 536] asserted that “lifting the taboo on discussing the influence of nationality [and ethnicity] on organization theories” will decrease the source of conflict and contradictions within and between multinational organizations.

Despite the persuasiveness of Hofstede’s theory detailing the fictional success of international acculturation, he was not convinced of any universal meta-theory and cited that the “universal approval of any theory of organization is impossible” [36, p. 532]. Furthermore, Hofstede [33, p. 62] long espoused that, “the consequences of the cultural

relativity of management theories are more serious for the multinational organization. Schein [52] astutely summarized this bi-cultural organizational dilemma with this assessment:

When one organization acquires another organization or when two organizations are merged, there is an inevitable culture clash because it is unlikely that two organizations will have the same cultures. The leadership role is to figure out how best to manage this clash. The two cultures can be left alone to continue to evolve in their own way. A more likely scenario is that one culture will dominate and gradually either convert or excommunicate the members of the other culture. A third alternative is to blend the two cultures by selecting elements of both cultures for the new organization. [52, pp. 189-190]

Just as countries, societies, communities, neighborhoods, religions, and families all have cultures, so do corporations. A successful corporation espouses and practices shared values, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, heroes, behavior patterns, technology, information and communication styles so that all employees “from the janitor to the CEO, all feel and express a common identity. A [strong] corporate culture . . . helps ensure that that people at all levels of the organization are pulling together in the same direction” [19, p. 43]. A well-defined and explicit corporate culture not only increases efficiency, it also contributes to overall competitiveness [3]. Similarly, when a domestic operation globalizes its business through an acquisition or merger, it typically devotes explicit attention to globalizing its culture, as well.

Nexus of Information to Culture Shock (Toffler’s and Oberg’s Theories)

"Information overload," a term coined by Gross [25, p. 856] and popularized by Toffler [61], refers to the difficulty a person can have understanding an issue, determining options, and making decisions that can be caused by the presence of too much information. Shannon [55; 56] argued that the most important attribute of a message was the information; and Simon [57] proffered that “bounded rationality” placed a perimeter around the maximum amount of information that a human can process at any time. Psychologists [21; 22; 23; 32;58; 59] viewed information overload as a bombardment to the senses; and Toffler's [61] explanation presented information overload as the Information Age's version of sensory overload, causing confusion, distraction, disorientation and lack of responsiveness. Toffler [61, pp. 350-351] suggested that: "When the individual is plunged into a fast and irregularly changing situation, or a novelty-loaded context ... his predictive accuracy plummets. He can no longer make the reasonably correct assessments on which rational behavior is dependent." Akin to Toffler's description, individuals' exposure to new organizational social-cultural environments through mergers and acquisitions also engender information overload, long before recognizing the validity of the content or the risk of misinformation.

Postman [48] provided a vivid description of the anxiety and frustration caused by the acquirer's zealous sensory bombardment leading directly to an acquiree's informational culture shock with:

Technology increases the available supply of information. As the supply is increased, control mechanisms are needed to cope with new information. When additional control mechanisms are themselves technical, they in turn further increase the supply of information. When the supply of information is longer controllable, a general breakdown in the psychic tranquility and social purpose occurs. Without defenses, people have no way of finding meaning in their experiences, lose their capacity to remember, and have difficulty imagining reasonable futures” [48, p. 72].

Although historical references trace the origin of the phrase “culture shock” to 1929 [14], the term was first developed into a model and popularized into common parlance by Oberg [46] to describe the frustrations of psychological disorientation, anxiety, and stress experienced by people who are suddenly exposed to radically different cultural environments. Oberg [p. 177] described culture shock as the “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse . . . in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life. . . . All or most of these familiar cues are removed . . . followed by a feeling of frustration and anxiety.” The goal is adjustment and recovery, known as acculturation, but according to Oberg [pp.179-180] relinquishing the feeling of

ethnocentrism, a “belief that your own culture, race, and nation form the center of the world” is not merely difficult but often impossible as “ethnocentrism is a characteristic of national groups.” Oberg [p. 179] concisely sums up the acculturation stage of his culture shock model with: “The environment does not change. What has changed is your attitude towards it.” Thereafter the term was widely adopted by other social scientists [13; 18; 20; 21; 36; 39; 64] that committed to and advocated the “culture shock” theory.

Following the initial stage of human reactions to “culture shock,” an adaptation process typically occurs when a healthy response and recovery to the “shock” is expected and coping strategies are developed. Successful recovery by all concerned is not always possible, but when it does it is commonly referred to as “acculturation” [36]. In a workplace environment, when cultural adaptation does not occur, people move on or leave due to new employment, lay-offs, firings, entrepreneurships, retirement, etc. to find and join new social-cultural groups where they can fit in and be accepted. When management ignores the influence of culture on individual approaches to work, “culture shock may be one of the major reasons why people supposedly *fail* when they leave one organization for another. Where they fail, however, is not necessarily in doing the job, but in not reading the culture correctly” [13, p. 17].

Oberg [46, p. 177] described the full immersion of culture shock as having four stages, “the honeymoon phase, regression, adjustment, and recovery periods.” Hofstede [36, p. 525] illustrated his culture shock model in three phases and further advised that not all culture clashes result in negative encounters if a period of adjustment, described as an *acculturation curve* (depicted in Figure 2), is provided. “This U-shaped curve pictures the common experience of people transferred to an unfamiliar environment: a first short phase of euphoria, followed by a phase of distress, called ‘culture shock,’ followed by a phase adaptation called acculturation” [36, p. 525].

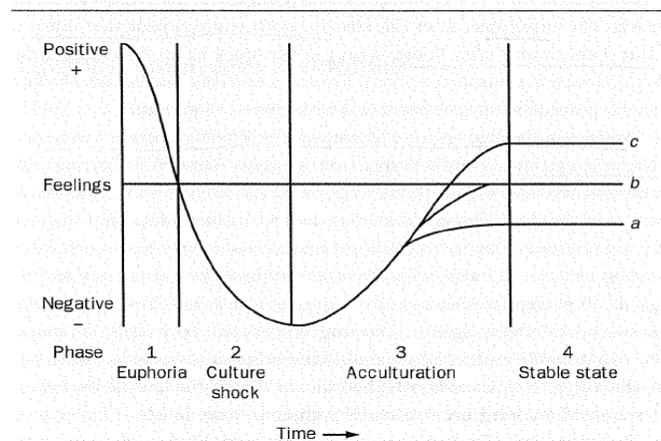


Figure 2. “The Acculturation Curve” [33, p. 385, Figure 11.1]

Barkema, Bell, and Pennings [2] suggested that a “double layered acculturation” occurred when an adjustment to both a strange national culture and a new corporate culture are required; often a common occurrence that presents an additional barrier during a global corporate acquisition or merger. And Scheffknecht [49, p. 73] offered that too much energy is expended to remedy these cultural barriers if multinational enterprises do not establish a “common language or way to collaborate all around the world.”

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner [64, p. 341] argued that the human race has an “abysmal grasp of values and relationships” and this malady often manifests itself in a serious lack of communication between the parties. The authors theorized that uncontrolled anxiety promotes culture shock than may result in global misunderstandings, technological miscommunications, cultural contradictions, and even derailed careers.

We learn about culture not simply through books and seminars . . . but through making errors and suffering culture shocks. Culture shock is a form of inner anxiety that gnaws away at us . . . most

of which impede accurate communication. [64, p. 339]

Constructs of National, Organizational (Corporate), and Occupational Cultures

Hofstede [36] noted that culture can be categorized into two primary groups with multiple subgroups: 1) National Culture (i.e. nation, region, ethnic group); and 2) Organizational Culture (i.e. business or work environment). Occupational culture is described as a hybrid of national and organizational cultures, due to its incorporation of both the inherent values of birthright and childhood influences and the learned practices of groups during late adolescence and adulthood [39]. Hofstede and Hofstede [38, p. 284] asserted that national and organizational cultures are two different phenomena, national culture based upon “mental software acquired during the first ten years of our lives [basic values],” and organizational culture [practices] acquired during adulthood as we enter a work environment “with our values firmly in place.”

National Culture. National culture is a phenomenon that one learns early in life through the social cultural environments of family, neighborhoods, generations, social class, religion, gender, teams, and school. This nationalistic culture determines the identity of a human group through symbols, heroes, rituals, and values the same way as personality determines the identity of an individual [35]. Hofstede [35, p. 12] described nationality as an attribute that we did not choose, “We are born within a family within a nation, and are subject to the mental programming of its culture from birth.”

Organizational Culture. Schein [52, p. 61] proffered that: “Organizational cultures ultimately are embedded in the national cultures in which an organization operates . . . reflected in the organization through the cultural backgrounds of its founders, leaders, and members.” Organizational culture is developed within the work environment and is based upon business plans, mission statements, managerial concepts, compensation systems, economic competition, technology integration and implementation, and workplace mores [31]. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov [39, pp. 344-345] define the term organizational culture, often referred to as corporate culture, as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one organization from another. An organization’s culture . . . [is also maintained] in the minds of its other ‘stakeholders’, everybody who interacts with the organization.” We become socialized to an organization’s culture upon entry into the workplace, and unlike national culture, an individual’s encounter with business culture is subject to change each time an employee voluntarily or involuntarily departs one organization and joins a new one.

Occupational Culture. Schein [50; 51; 52] argued that business cultures should be compared and examined among the three occupational communities of: Executive, Engineering, and Operator; referred to by this author as “*the boss, the brain, and the brawn.*” Occupational communities are cultural groups that have roots outside the organization due to the disciplines they represent, unlike departmental cultural groups whose roots are primarily embedded within organizational boundaries and often overlap or cross cultures. “Shared assumptions derive from common origins, common educational background, the requirements of a given occupation, and the shared contact with others in the occupation” [53, p. 57] resulting in a shared occupational culture regardless of the employer. For over twenty-five years, Schein has theorized that these three occupational communities exist in constant conflict and turmoil.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research project was designed as an exploratory and descriptive qualitative approach to inquiry following extensive study of the qualitative methodologies of cultural anthropologists, social scientists, and business management theorists. The philosophical/epistemological approach represented the “interpretivist worldview, combined with social constructivism seek[ing] individuals’ understanding of the world in which they live and work . . . rely[ing] as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” [12, p. 20]. This interpretive path focused on the cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives “to inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” [12, p. 21].

The goal of this study was to explore and observe how a foreign parent company's national culture influenced the organizational culture of its U.S. subsidiary by observing the impact of these cultural differences on an American business groups' social behavior and decision-making processes. Additionally, it could not be ignored that the presence of another U.S. company, the acquiring global entity, also exerted significant influence upon the American subsidiary during this transition phase, therefore observations of the acquiring business entity were included, as well. The overarching Research Questions (RQs) for this study were twofold as follows.

- *How does the national culture of a French parent company influence business meetings and group dynamics in the organizational culture of its U.S. subsidiary company?*
- *How does the global culture of an acquiring U.S. parent company influence business meetings and group dynamics in the organizational culture of its newly acquired U.S. subsidiary company?*

Agile Ethnography

This research was designed as an exploratory and inductive qualitative approach to inquiry that employed the unique interpretive ethnomethodology of agile ethnography [60], a theory researched by Robert Joseph Skovira of Robert Morris University over a ten-year period and now practiced as an interactive form of adaptive and flexible participant-observation. Agile ethnography was chosen for its fluid, rapid, short-term, non-static research process designed to capture the multi-layered and multi-leveled social-cultural environments of a business situation. An agile ethnography is encapsulated by the constraints of time and access; the boundaries of a facility, department, or discipline; the interchangeable, overlapping, and cross-cutting cultural groups; and the researcher's limited period of performance, hence its name "*agile*." An agile ethnography copes with and overcomes the related constraints of time, location, access, and ever-changing and evolving organizational events through flexibility, maneuverability, and the ability to rapidly adapt to dynamic scope and environmental changes; while remaining true to the qualitative tradition of capturing thick description [24] and rich detail. Figure 3 depicts the three converging components of a successful agile ethnography: 1). fluid process; 2). dynamic environment; and 3). an adaptable flexible researcher; all of whom are *agile*.



Figure 3. Essential Intersecting Components of an Agile Ethnography

A sample size of 76 participants, representing eleven social-cultural groups, was solicited from a pool of 250 professional and managerial employees of a U.S. subsidiary corporation owned by a multi-national French parent company. The sourcing commenced with the Communications Department and by extension expanded throughout the Human Resources, Project Management, Engineering, Finance, Accounting, Purchasing, Contracts, Proposals, Tendering, and Information Technology groups, focusing on those that experienced sustained or routine interaction and relationships with the parent company. The sampling frame was one of convenience, dependent upon volunteer participants, informed consent, and group members' respective availability to the researcher. Befitting this methodology, the events and interactions of the social cultural group(s) were repetitively observed and recorded in a bounded office workplace environment over a period of 120 days.

The construct of culture was operationalized in concert with its subcomponents of national, organizational, and occupational cultures, through the traditional ethnographic instruments of fieldwork, specifically participant-observations of social-cultural groups, conversations with informants, and examination of artifacts, including written and electronic documentation. The data were captured and memorialized by implementing the tools of field journals, notebooks, pens, pencils, highlighters, colored markers, digital camera, laptop and printer. The observed culture constructs were recorded and compared to the cultural dimensions and attributes of power distance and uncertainty avoidance [34]; high/low context and temporal/spatial proxemics [26; 27; 28; 29]; kinesics [7]; semiotics [11; 15]; and language [1] as manifested through electronic and hard copy data, artifacts, and sensory information.

For the purposes of this research, pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the organizations. Therefore, the players were known as, **ABC**, a U.S. Midwestern subsidiary company; **ABC SAS**, the French parent company; and **GOTHAM**, the elephantine U.S. global acquiring company.

RESULTS - INTERPRETATIONS

What began as an inquiry of a French parent company's national cultural influence upon its U.S. subsidiary, suddenly and without warning, morphed into a study of two multicultural corporate influences upon an American company. The multicultural sensory assault to the American subsidiary resulted in a *double* culture shock precipitated by an unexpected information overload to an unsuspecting, unprepared, and very naïve acquiree. **ABC**, a U.S. Midwestern subsidiary company; **ABC SAS**, a French parent company; and **GOTHAM**, a behemoth U.S. global company, are the players and this study is their multicultural story.

ABC is an engineer-centric Midwestern U.S. corporation owned by a French parent company with global reach, known as **ABC SAS**. Striving for years to obtain name recognition in the U.S., **ABC** never achieved the identity and respect that its French parent company and foreign subsidiaries enjoyed throughout the world. This is evident by its modest structure in a suburban economic development park ten miles from a major metropolitan area and forty miles from its airport. **ABC**'s unassuming rather drab facility painted in hues of gray and light blue is a single main floor of 23,300 square feet comprised of offices, cubes, and a research and development laboratory; and a full-sized basement divided into a manufacturing shop floor and several storage areas. This facility is home to approximately 250 U.S. employees and various foreign ex-patriots and visitors, who serve the company in the areas of engineering; executive and operations management; manufacturing; technology; sales and business development; and various types of professional administrative and clerical support roles. **ABC** is organized as an informal structural frame corporation [8] of low context [26], monochronic [30], low power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance [39] due to the controls put in place by **ABC SAS**. **ABC** is tightly controlled by HQ and secures HQ approvals to act at almost every level; prepares all internet and intranet posts, correspondence, and corporate reports in both French and English; and represents all financial reports by converting dollars to Euros (€s). **ABC** is subjected to a daily plethora of informative emails, directives, conference calls, skyping, and face-to-face meetings.

ABC's parent company, **ABC SAS**, is located in Paris, France in a small upscale boutique facility. **ABC SAS** headquarters (HQ) is comprised of approximately fifty-five staff employees and executive management whose total worldwide annual revenue (including all the affiliates) exceeds \$100M €. **ABC SAS** has a long and storied European history evolving through French, German, and British mergers and acquisitions since 1883 and is a well-known and respected engineering research, development, and manufacturing entity worldwide. In 2005, it entered the U.S. market with its acquisition of several American firms, including **ABC**, to complement its business portfolio and complete its worldwide persona as a major industrial player. According to others who have visited the Paris office, **ABC SAS** is fashionable, elegant, well-furnished and appointed as befitting a corporate headquarters (HQ) of an international company. The atmosphere is formal, the employees are well-dressed and properly accessorized, and everyone speaks, reads, and writes in English, as well as French. The intimate and elegant Paris space that houses *only* the parent company executive management team and their administrative assistants is geared to impress, not to research, develop, or manufacture anything. **ABC SAS** is a high context [26], polychronic [30], high uncertainty avoidance and high power distance [39] organization, strictly organized within a pyramidal hierarchical structure

[8]. HQ is intensely proud of its national culture, history, language, fine arts, standards of elegance, class structure, formality, and its reputation of being the world's arbiter of good taste.

During the second week into the research period ABC SAS publicly announced that it had agreed to sell all of its worldwide assets, including the American ABC, to **GOTHAM**, a behemoth U.S. business concern with an even larger worldwide presence. Following U.S. and French Government approvals, the sale closed within the research period, therefore ABC's steady troop of French visitors rapidly expanded with visits augmented by corporate executives and managers from **GOTHAM**, whose mission was to learn the business of ABC and become acquainted with the employees in record time. **GOTHAM** is a colossal U.S. business concern of approximately 400,000 worldwide employees with its American roots originating in 1892. Its annual gross revenue is approximately \$200 billion; therefore **GOTHAM**'s acquisition of ABC SAS, including ABC and all the other affiliate companies, was considered a minor but important asset purchase. **GOTHAM** is considered a traditional formal procedural-based authoritarian structured corporation [4] with tight control, risk avoidance, and results-oriented philosophies [39] patently displayed by the **GOTHAM** visitors in their appearance, demeanors, attitudes, ideas, and an innovative capitalist culture that drives its success. In no small part, **GOTHAM**'s success in the 21st century is its acceptance of Toffler's [61] concept of *future shock*, a theory described as living in a cultural environment that is changing so rapidly that people feel they are constantly living in the future. **GOTHAM** embraces the accelerated pace of cultural change and uses "the apparent shrinking of the cultural world" [20, p. 393] to its economic advantage through technology, electronic communications, systems integration, and global acquisitions. "All cultures experience continual change" [19, p. 30] and one of **GOTHAM**'s greatest strengths is its ability to adapt and grow by borrowing from an acquired culture so that it does not have to invent, create, or discover again. Ferraro [19, p. 31] describes this "cultural borrowing in terms of economy of effort . . . [as] cultural diffusion;" Liebowitz [42, p. 16] refers to this phenomenon as "high performing [agility]." Much of **GOTHAM**'s success lies in its exploitation and adaptation of acquired technologies, corporate assets, and cultural transfer from companies like ABC SAS and ABC. However, it is well-known in the industry that **GOTHAM** is very selective and also easily discards the technologies, human capital and other assets that do not prove profitable, economically feasible, or mutually beneficial to its other business units in the short run. Bond, et al. [9] and Hofstede [35] refer to **GOTHAM**'s results-oriented and swift rewards theory that focuses primarily on the present as *short-term orientation*. To **GOTHAM**, short-term orientation principally applies to results-oriented balance sheets and primary allegiance to stockholders and board members. **GOTHAM** is prepared, confident, and has acquired often and well. **GOTHAM** is unafraid of the future; **GOTHAM** is *agile*.

Ethnographic participant observation, informant conversations and the examination of corporate cultural artifacts resulted in many findings as described and summarized in Table 2. Qualitative data analysis, including validity triangulation by iteratively cross-comparing journal notes, informant interviews, and artifacts, resulted in many findings of specific cultural influences that all contributed to ABC's culture shock. However, due to page constraints this paper focuses solely on the significance of information overload and the role each parent company played upon the U.S. subsidiary, resulting in its *dual* paralytic culture shock.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

| French Parent Company - ABC SAS | U.S. Subsidiary Corporation - ABC | U.S. Global Acquirer - GOTHAM |
|---|--|--|
| Strong National Culture | Weak Organizational Culture | Strong Global Culture of Normative Control |
| Strong Charismatic Leader | Weak Leadership Team | Strong Charismatic Leader |
| Formal Pyramidal Hierarchical Management | Informal Structural Frame | Formal Structural Frame; Divisions Reporting to Executive VPs |
| Information Overload to U.S. Subsidiary: Communications; Announcements; Emails; Intranet Postings; Corporate Directives; Meetings; Conference Calls; Strict Hierarchical Approval Levels; All Correspondence & Reports in French/English & Euros/Dollars | Recipient of each Parent Company's Information Overload resulted in a <i>double</i> paralytic culture shock that stymied its technological and economic corporate growth. | Information Overload to U.S. Subsidiary: Formal Communications; Intranet Postings; Daily Announcements; Emails; Online/On Ground Training Programs; Rigorous Policies & Procedures; Business Unit & Department Wkly. Conf. Calls & Mtgs; Numerous Integration Teams |

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| Communications Technology: Blackberry® assigned to Managers and higher; Minimal access required during off-work hrs.; Respected work-life balance | Communications Technology: Blackberry® considered an employee tracking device, “leash” [63] and invasion of privacy during non-work hours | Communications Technology: Blackberry® assigned to <u>all</u> professional employees; Access required 24/7/365; Work-life balance not respected nor considered [63] |
| Shared History, Values, Practices, Goals (Strong National Pride) | Disparate History, Values, Practices, Goals (Melting Pot Universality) | Integrated History; Rules-Based Values, Practices, Goals (Strong Global Pride) |
| Strong Acceptance of Power Distance | Weak Acceptance of Power Distance | Medium Acceptance of Power Distance; High Level of Peer Respect |
| High Uncertainty Avoidance; Closed System (Guarded) | High Uncertainty Avoidance (due to constraints set by HQ); Open System | High Uncertainty Avoidance Disguised by Faux-Risk-Taking Bravado; Excessive Planning; Technology used as Control Tool |
| High Context; Polychronic Environment | Low Context; Monochronic Environment | Low Context; Monochronic Environment |
| Status, Class Distinctions; Formal Language | Meritocracy-Driven; Informal Language of Lingo and Slang | Meritocracy-Driven; Formal Language; Scripted |
| Confined Space, Intimacy, Relationship Building, Networking, Debate-Prone, Patience | Personal Space, Schedule-Prone, Action-Driven, Results-Oriented, Impatience | Personal Space, Schedule-Prone, Action-Driven, Results-Oriented, Methodical; Careful |
| Executive-Centric | Engineer-Centric | Peer-Centric; Equality of Business Units |
| Executive Subculture Dominates | Engineer Subculture Dominates | Executive/Bus. Unit Subcultures Dominate |
| Results: Culture is a social game [32]; who we are; how we get along; and how we do things around here. Both ABC SAS’s and GOTHAM’s stronger corporate cultures enabled it to play the “cultural-social game” successfully by learning, communicating, disseminating information, sharing rules, clearly identifying the players, and defining their roles. ABC’s weaker nascent corporate culture never learned how to play the “cultural-social game” as it was completely unaware there was a game to be learned and played. ABC lacked cultural intelligence and awareness; therefore it experienced a paralytic culture shock. | | |

Culture Shock and Acculturation

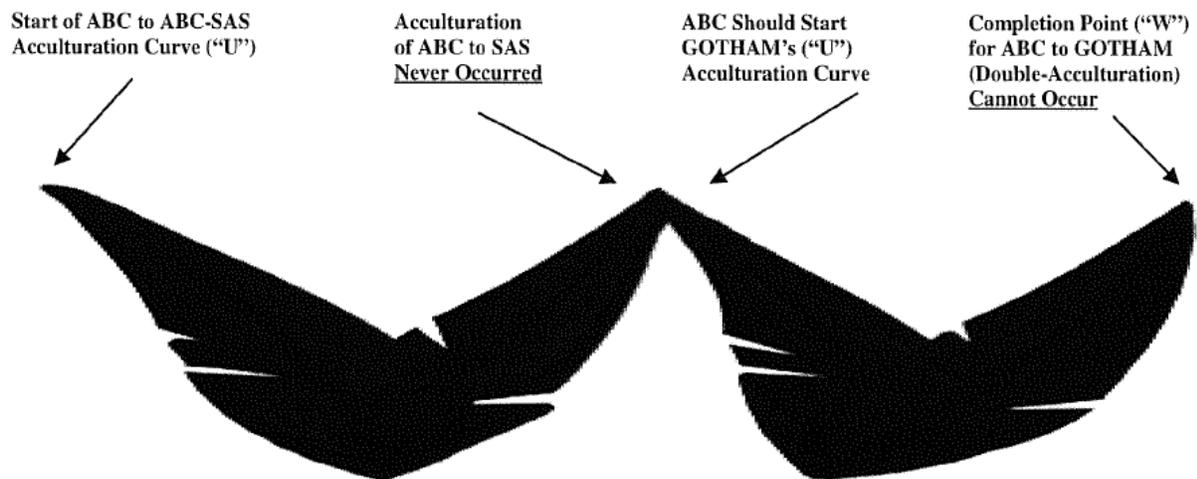
Oberg [46, pp. 47-48] cited six aspects of culture shock, all of which applied to the majority of the ABC employees, *twice*.

1. *Strain due to the extra effort required to make necessary adaptations.* ABC employees had to cope with an influx of new information and technologies; learn new IT systems and policies and procedures, changes to benefits, retirement, and payroll programs; and attend multiple compliance and ethics training programs. Some could not tolerate the bombardment of new information and the requirements to adjust and adapt quickly to the corporate changes. Those who felt great strain took the remainder of their sick and vacation days and when they had exhausted this remedy, if they still could not cope, they voluntarily or involuntarily left the company.
2. *A sense of loss and feeling of deprivation.* ABC employees struggled with the loss of the familiar and old ways of doing things; and the loss of many co-workers (i.e. support groups) due to lay-offs and firings.
3. *Being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture.* ABC employees had to adjust to the management practices of new supervisors and bosses; and the integration of the acquiring company employees. Concerns were rampant that if they did not fit in to the new culture, they would lose their jobs.
4. *Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity.* ABC employees were fearful of new ways of doing things, new practices and systems, and of making mistakes. Some no longer had the same jobs and were transferred to new positions and work environments. Due to the constant bombardment of information, employees could not discern and had little time to triage the data they needed to prioritize and perform their jobs in conformance with each parent company’s mandates.
5. *Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences.* As the national and organizational cultural differences became more pronounced, many ABC employees became vocal with their displeasure toward the changes each new company enacted. Emails, more so than water-cooler talk, became the tool of widespread and rapid communication and a chance to vent 24/7 to willing listeners inside and outside the company.
6. *Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new technologies and environment.* Some ABC employees were overwhelmed with the corporate, procedural, and technological changes, all of which were beyond their control. Many became paralyzed with shock, fearful that they could not learn the new

requirements and successfully acculturate to the new environment. Others were so snowed under with electronic and written information that they chose technology workarounds rather than learn new systems.

Had ABC successfully made its cultural adjustment by accepting and acclimating to the influence of ABC SAS's national culture, ABC's acculturation might have coincided with Furnham and Bochner's [23] normative prediction of culture shock survival. "[Following] literature's notion of the U-curve of adjustment (or one of its variants, such as the W-curve), the basic idea being that . . . if they survive this bad period, they will in due course emerge 'adjusted' and able to cope with their new environment. Presumably the bottom of the U-curve coincides with the period when culture shock is most acute. [23, p. 247]

Had ABC recovered from its French culture shock and successfully acculturated to the former ABC SAS; it is presumed that the U-shaped pattern would have continued into the W-curve as ABC once again became "acculturated" to GOTHAM's global organizational social-cultural environment. But as the inductive research of this agile ethnography transpired, neither a completed U-shaped nor the onset of a W-shaped curve of acculturation occurred for ABC. Figure 4 depicts ABC's stalled acculturation process within its W-shaped curve.



ABC is stalled at the lowest point of "Culture Shock" and cannot advance through the ABC SAS "Acculturation Process." Likewise, ABC cannot progress through the subsequent GOTHAM "Acculturation Process." Instead, the acculturation of ABC to GOTHAM will commence from its stalled position in the ABC SAS "Culture Shock" mode, *still in distress and at a corporate disadvantage.*

Figure 4. ABC's Lack of Progress in the Double-Acculturation Curve ("U" + "U" = "W")

ABC's employees spent the past six years within its organizational work environment continually exposed to unfamiliar national cultural influences imposed by its French parent that they neither understood nor could relate. "Culture shock occurs when a sojourner is unfamiliar with the social conventions of the new culture, or if familiar with them, unable or unwilling to perform according to these rules" [23, p. 250], causing serious stress and anxiety. Indicative of this researcher's observations of group dynamics at ABC, culture shock [44; 45; 54] has often been referred to as individuals' lacking points of reference; social norms; rules to guide their actions and understand others' behavior; feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and estrangement; and lack of self-confidence and distrust of others. ABC's employees' lack of spontaneity and joy in their work and co-workers reflects a genuine lack of cultural awareness, also known as the term of art referred to as "cultural intelligence" [16; 43; 47; 52; 53].

Schein [52, p. 224] asserted that "cultural intelligence is a perspective that explains anomalies and conflicts. . . . Resistance to change begins to look normal and . . . in that humility you will find wisdom and an increased capacity to work with others whose thoughts and feelings may be very different from yours." Furthermore, Schein [52, p.

196] argues that when an acquisition goes south or acculturation does not result favorably, cultural mismatches are often blamed cautioning that “In the case of outright acquisitions the parent company will, of course, impose some of its core processes immediately, even when this is dysfunctional.” GOTHAM’s information overload upon ABC proved severely dysfunctional, with one exception. ABC’s professional Support Groups *low context* subculture *embraced* the deluge of electronic and hard copy data and *thrived*.

In addition to Schein’s three occupational subcultures of Engineers, Operators, and Executives, this agile ethnography identified a fourth multi-occupational subculture of professional Support Groups that had not been identified by Schein as a unique and independent occupational subculture. As a collective functional group it was never accorded full and equal standing as a valuable contributor to team success. However, all corporations require the necessary services of Purchasing, Contracts, Legal, Accounting, Finance, Payroll, Human Resources, Communications, Proposal Development, and IT Support, for without these essential contributions no organization can claim long-term viable success. This researcher argues that the Support Groups subculture is the corporate “glue” that binds the framework of strategic infrastructure through communication, cooperation, and collaboration for all other subcultures through compliance programs, policies and procedures, training, rules, regulations, audits, and documentation control of the ever essential electronic or hard copy “paperwork.” The professional Support Groups are the foundation (the “bedrock”) integral to the control, dissemination, and flow of information. And not surprisingly, the Support Groups were the only ABC employees to accept, adapt, and successfully process the information overload; albeit not without some grumbling (exhibiting esprit de corps) and a generous dose of daily laughter at the absurdity of it all.

Referring to large global companies with strong organizational cultures, Kunda [41, p. 219] proffered that the “engineering of normative control . . . [is] based on the use of symbolic power.” And true to form, GOTHAM flexed its muscles and did not wait long to begin the cultural inculcation of ABC and the other ABC SAS affiliates. Schein [52, p. 215] further warned that “Culture is deep, extensive, and stable. It cannot be taken lightly. If you do not manage culture, it will manage you – and you may not be aware of the extent to which this is happening.” Just as the French national culture of ABC SAS proved to be strong and stable over time; the same could be said for the global organizational culture of GOTHAM. For this second cultural transition to be successful, ABC must be wary of, but not fearful or paralyzed by these cultural differences, or it will surely fall victim to another stronger culture again. The true goal will be to draw upon the social-cultural intelligence of the surviving ABC groups willing to compromise with GOTHAM to create a new vibrant collaborative business culture built upon each corporation’s strengths; or alternatively, permit ABC to find its *niche* within GOTHAM to establish, nurture, and contribute through its own unique subculture.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted how the social-cultural environment of a U.S. subsidiary company was influenced by the national culture of its French parent company and the increasingly dominant global culture of its U.S. acquiring company. Founded as the U.S. subsidiary corporation of ABC SAS in 2005, ABC had its own U.S. national and organizational cultures complete with its social-cultural groups and networks, vocabularies, practices (rituals and heroes, and symbols) that organized its experiences into systems of meanings. During the course of this study, the employees of ABC U.S. were observed to cope with a variety of issues and constraints, based upon the formal edicts and informal requirements of both its foreign parent company and the acquiring U.S. global parent company resulting in a never-ending bombardment of information. Based upon the results of this study, *it was concluded that upon its acquisition by ABC SAS, ABC experienced a never-ending paralysis of “culture shock” from which it never fully recovered.* Figure 5 depicts a *double* culture shock experienced by a cultural group with negative results.

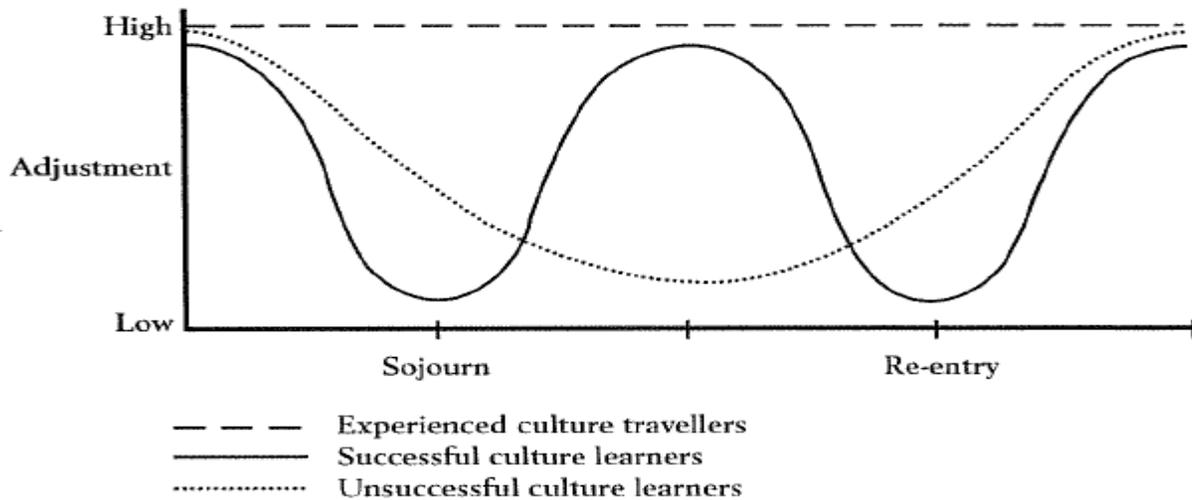


Figure 5. Furnham's [22, p. 59] depiction of an unsuccessful cultural traveler who experienced *double culture shock*, made no adjustments, and learned nothing.

It bears repeating that ABC did not exist long enough to develop its own mature and strong organizational culture with the ability to withstand external forces that were not always mutually beneficial to its survival. Therefore, the stronger national culture of ABC SAS and the global mega organizational culture of GOTHAM easily overwhelmed the nascent weaker organizational culture of ABC. This researcher opines that ABC became the victim of its own lack of national, organizational, and occupational cultural awareness and intelligence commencing with its French founding; and then a second time through *GOTHAM's* acquisition, but this time the paralysis was accompanied by something akin to an awestruck and reverent stupor.

The low context monochronic environment of ABC somewhat aligns with the global culture of GOTHAM; but it directly conflicts with the nationalistic high context polychronic culture of ABC SAS. Hooker [40, p. 331] rationalized the U.S. melting pot as a solution to its struggle with multiculturalism by "universalizing rationality." The disparate peoples of the U.S. are bound together, not by common cultural heritage, but by a shared rulebook. The culture is low context . . . [that] suits a nation of immigrants. Since norms tend to be transmitted explicitly rather than by cultural tradition, newcomers can get by with only minimal knowledge of the culture. . . . The extreme individualism of the U.S. gives its rule-based society a special flavor" [40, pp. 332-333]. And Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov [39, p. 340] concur with: "*Nationality constrains rationality.*"

Each player, ABC, ABC SAS, and GOTHAM, represented three distinct and disparate national and organizational cultures based upon its country of origin, inherent corporate values, and learned business and social-cultural practices. This descriptive study interpreted their influences and complicated relationships by examining the communities of practice, systems of meanings, symbols, and language exposing the cultural disconnects, miscues, contradictions, different worldviews and fields of experience manifested by an information overload and promulgated by a foreign parent company and a global acquiring entity, upon its American subsidiary.

This agile ethnography revealed a number of unresolved cultural issues, problems, and controversies, and consequently raised almost as many questions as it answered. Although the findings of qualitative research are not considered *generalizable*, one goal is that the results, or in this case the agile ethnography itself, may be *transferable* to like or similar situations that have strict commonalities comparable to other settings "because of shared characteristics" [17, p. 32]. The boundaries of the study that caused its limitations have also provided opportunities for future research. For example, performing a follow-on study of ABC, as a member of GOTHAM, to observe and

record its progress beyond “culture shock” through the “acculturation” process would complete the study of a U.S. subsidiary’s survival or demise through corporate acquisition.

Based upon the results of this agile ethnography and ABC’s lack of basic cultural awareness and intelligence, ABC will require substantial attendant assistance from GOTHAM with its second attempt at recovery from culture shock due, in great part, to information overload. However, without the patience and support of GOTHAM, ABC’s lack of cultural awareness and intelligence will surely result in history repeating itself. Now that the full acquisition process has been legally completed, GOTHAM’s prior global experience indicates that it should be well-positioned to guide and monitor the acculturation process for its new subsidiary, so that ABC can finally find its *niche*, its ever-important *raison d’être*. *But only time and further study will tell . . .*

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