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## MANAGING CULTURAL AND ETHICAL VARIABILITY IN THE GLOBALIZED WORK ENVIRONMENT

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*Lambe Kayode Mustapha &  
Kehinde Kadijat Kadiri*

### *Abstract*

*Communication is a key variable in the organization of human relations at individual, group and societal levels. The arrival of new communication technologies, however, brought about significant changes in the strategy and conducts of the contemporary organizations. The integration of the entire globe, through breath-taking technological apparatuses affects every societal institution in many ways that are challenging yet opportunity-oriented. Mostly affected in the lives of today's organizations are the areas of organizational interaction, structure and culture. In view of the role of changing communication technologies in structural, functional and survival of organizations in this era of globalization, this paper presents the pan-theoretical, communication-induced, adjustments that guarantee a perfect working alchemy among postmodern workers of diverse intellectual, cultural, ethical and linguistic milieus.*

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*Lambe Kayode Mustapha, is a lecturer at the Dept. of Mass Communication, University of Ilorin, Kehinde Kadijat Kadiri, is also a lecturer at the Dept. of Mass Communication, University of Lagos*

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication is a key variable in the organization of human relations. Social institutions, such as corporate organizations, therefore, evolve due in part to the ability of the constituents to buy into common ideas, ideals and values that are internalised via communicative acts (Wood, 2004). The complexity of organizations from the industrial epoch to the contemporary post-industrial era has therefore led to a burgeoning research and scholastic activities that centre on documenting the determinants of organizational success. To make the workers function in the new social settings, organizations create structures and cultures that serve as parameters for harmonizing divergent perspectives with a view to achieve the organizational goals and reduce frictions among the socially pluralistic constituents.

Since communication forms the nucleus of organizational relations, organizational communication has equally evolved along other areas of research in organizational studies. But organization communication is a challenging endeavours due to its inherent nexus with other aspects of the organization, the variability of cultures of the organization's members, and the vagaries inherent in the open systems that envelope the organization (Schachaf, 2008; Schmidt, 2006). Besides this sociological complexity, organizations also contend with continually fleeting technological revolutions that impinge on their communications. These changes combined alter, to a greater or lesser extent, the ability of organizations to mushroom or atrophy within and beyond their initial geographical domains. The interactions of evolving technologies and

traditional management philosophies have thus resulted into the birth of a hybridized organizational environment that is intriguingly challenging.

While the industrial revolution and its analogue machines led to the development of geographically and culturally homogeneous organizations with scalar but closely-knitted management structure (Baker, 2002), the postmodern era, with the digital technologies, extends the frontiers of organizations, entrenches cultural diversity and flattens the organizational structure (Guillén, 2000; Mamgai & Jolly, 2009; Marković, 2008). The advances in technologies and transportation resulting into the diffusion of corporate organizations beyond their places of birth have opened new vistas in the research endeavours of organizational communication scholars. Globalization, as this the overarching development that brought about this change is dubbed, has therefore resulted into a retinue of studies segmentally conducted on various changes wrought on organizations.

From the forms and patterns of organizational communication (Baker, 2002; Littlejohn, 2002; West & Turner, 2007; Griffin, 2009) to effects of individuals and work environment on the use and appreciation of the new technologies (D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008); globalization-induced corporate structure, culture and cultural diversity (Guillén, 2000; Marković, 2008; Moon, 1997; Schachaf, 2008; Schmidt, 2008); and global organization ethics (Gergen, n. d; Mattson & Stage, 2001), the literature of organization studies has not only been burgeoning but theoretically expanding. This paper, therefore, attempts a pan-theoretical analysis of how communication facilitates acclimatization of organizations to the multi-faceted changes that follow the globalization of workplaces.

## GLOBALIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Organizations have become integral parts of the institutions in the human society from the time immemorial. Human society, according to Littlejohn (2002), is an organizational society- people live, work, enjoy leisure times, play, pray and die in organizations. Like all living organisms, organizations thrive by maintaining homeostasis through communication. Organizational communication could, therefore, be regarded as the central nervous system of the organization. Miller (2006: 1) offers that studying organizational communication "involves understanding how the context of organization influences communication processes and how the symbolic nature of communication differentiates it from other forms of organizational behaviour". Organizational studies scholars have also found organism metaphor apt in explaining organizational structures, functions and processes (Littlejohn, 2002; Griffin, 2009; Schmidt, 2006; West & Turner, 2007). However, communication within the organization, as with other parts of the social system, is a function of available technologies. These technologies differentiate modes of organizational communication of different epochs. Hence, proximal physical communication of earlier organizations has given way to dispersed virtual communication in today's globalized organizational settings.

Globalization changes every aspect of human interaction and not the least organizational communication. Globalization is associated with the growing mobility of goods, services, commodities, information, people and communication across national frontiers, with events and decisions in one part of the world having significant consequences for individuals and social systems (Arnold & Sikka, 2001; IMD, 2007; Marković, 2008). This development allows organizations to infiltrate the

globe with their products and services. It also triggered a number of changes in organizational structure and communication, job structure and management of the most vital organizational resource- human beings (Horea & Horea, 2007; IMD, 2007; Marković, 2002).

Zekos (2004) is of the opinion that "one of the principle features of globalization is the perception of the creation of a transnational community in which geopolitical boundaries are reduced to no more than bureaucratic nuisances". Access to free market, incredible knowledge, sophisticated production and distribution system, democratization of regimes and flattening of organizational structure are also deemed to be benefits of globalization (Guillén, 2000; IMD, 2007; Kung, 2008; Marković, 2008). Since organizations' survival classically depends on dynamism and ability to innovate, Luthans (2002:38) advises that organizations should approach business in alignment with changing technological, social, cultural and ethical contexts brought by globalization.

### **GLOBALIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Due to its influence on greater mobility, interconnectedness and knowledge diffusion, globalization facilitates greater exploration and exploitation of global human and material resources and results into convergence of divergent cultures. Culture reflects shared meanings, norms and values that stand out people of different background. It encompasses "what we are taught to think, feel and do in a given situation by the society in which we were raised" (Laroche & Rutherford, 2007: 2). We are now living in a global village whose inhabitants of different cultural beliefs, religion persuasions and ethical backgrounds are internationally mobile, work in cross-cultural environments that are more

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often in temporary team or even virtual corporations (Holtzman, Kruger & Stroak, 2009).

Like other social settings, organizations also have distinguishing culture. Marković (2008) defines organizational culture as "specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization". The culture of an organization includes symbols, knowledge, ideology, values and rituals and the meanings attached to them by members of the organization (West & Turner, 2007; Wood, 2004). However, the melding of culturally divergent employees into a monoculture workforce in the globalized work environment necessitates the creation of clear, purposeful and goal-oriented and inclusive overarching culture that takes care of the organization and the workers' interests (Gergen, n. d.; Marković, 2008; World Bank, n. d.).

The challenge of achieving less problematic cultural and ethical transaction in the postmodern organization has led to the creation of corporate culture that are weaved around the interests of the organizations, workers and the host communities with technologies mediating the relationship. One of the greatest challenges usually encountered by organization operating at the global realm, however, is exportation of organizational rules or 'ways of doing things' in the parent country to a new environment. This reproduction of work environment is what Greenberg and Baron (2008:20) termed Convergence Hypothesis- a biased approach to the study of management, which assumes that principles of good management are universal. This philosophy of management opposes the divergence approach which, according to Miller (2006:314), emphasized that the cultural distinctiveness found around the world remains a problem

In addition, Shriberg and Kuran (2000) raised the other problems of globalized work environments: ethnocentrism- exaggerated tendency to think that one own group or race is superior to those of other groups or races; and cultural misinformation- the act of applying historical information about a group of people as generalization to individuals belonging to that group. Schachaf (2008) also contends that miscommunication resulting from cultural and linguistic differences among workers of globalized enterprises has potential to jeopardize trust, cohesion and team identity.

Because cultures are the software by which human beings function in the society, there is the great need to achieve compatibility through intense cultural education, adaptability and tolerance. Understanding cultural whys behind behaviour helps people recognise a wide array of norms that exist around the world- from how people communicate (directly or circuitously) to how they participate in meeting, greet each other, or decide how close or far to stand from one another (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque & Rowe, 2008: 139). The challenges posed by cultural hegemony can therefore be resolved by new theories such as cultural relativism and cultural pluralism which are more sensitive to individual cultures than to group cultures (Alkadry, 2008).

### **POSTMODERN CORPORATE STRUCTURE, ETHICS AND JOB STRUCTURE**

As the tides of globalization breeze through the contemporary corporate landscapes, pummelling the temporo-spatial barriers that previously separated government, people and organizations of the world, there was the need to adjust organizational structure and job structure.

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Contrary to the dominance of tangible goods' production of the industrial era, the globalization era places emphasis on services (Baker, 2002; Miller, 2006). This, perhaps, informs the coinage of information/Knowledge economy. Key characteristics of knowledge economy as identified by Marković (2008) are explosion of free markets, unparalleled access to knowledge through the Internet, democratization of regimes and the flattening of organizational hierarchies. Inherent in this development are opportunities and challenges for organizations. Shriberg and Kumari (2009: 106) lay bare the impact of technological revolution on organization:

The reality of today's global workplace is that technological tools such as e-mail, conference calls, video conferencing and the internet have made it very likely that individual in one country will interact directly with colleagues, customers, and suppliers in other countries or cultures. Globalization and technology have created unique communication challenges as people find that although geographic disconnects can be overcome with relative ease, the more subtle disconnectedness created by different value systems and internalized assumption is harder to diagnosed and, therefore, harder to overcome.

This new wave occasioned by increasing technological advances has altered the nature of work relations, organizational architecture and the day-to-day running of the organization (Horea & Horea, 2007). The communication revolution did not only cause re-engineering of the organization but diminish the prior years' bureaucratic mode of management, tall hierarchy and wide span of control. Reliance is now placed on horizontal network relationship where decisions are made at a fast pace (Baker, 2002; Roukis & Zarb, 2006).

The globalization of industries has also led to the dilemma on

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what is ethical. Greenberg and Baron (2008: 62-65) provide two perspectives on ethical consideration- ethical relativism which is based on the notion of 'nothing is sacred' and the popular aphorism 'if you are in Rome do like Romans do'; and ethical imperialism which views ethics as unique and believes what is different may be wrong. Because ethical imperialism may be problematic for organizations operating in the international arena, Greenberg and Baron propose a global ethical standard that relies on respect for human core values, sensitivity to local tradition and recognition of context when distinguishing between right and wrong. This is more important in an era that facilitates technologically connected but temporally dislocated working arena.

Although many challenges were posed by advanced information and communication technologies, a plethora of prospects abounds. For example, the importance of team work was brought to the fore, with a new dimension known as virtual team. Virtual team, according to Cragan, Kasch and Wright (2009:23), "is a task-oriented group that can collaborate across time, space and organizational boundaries by harnessing the power of computer-mediated communication and group communication support systems (GCSSs)". Ahuja & Carley (1999) also describe virtual organizations as geographically distributed organizations whose members are bound by a long-term commitment and goals, and who communicate and coordinate their work through information technology (Schmidt, 2008). This means that geographically dispersed workers can collaborate on jobs by mere connection to the organization information grid thus minimizing the cost of associated with physical convergence of the workers.

Handling a task or project by multiple contributors located across different time zone, however, impact on employees' collaboration and

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communication including those of language and cultural diversity (Mamgai & Jolly, 2009; Schmidt, 2006). Appropriate theoretical approaches are therefore needed to mitigate these obstacles. Hence, there is the need to map out the resources needed by the team to facilitate efficient communication and collaboration in both co-located and remote settings. Although the physical separation typically involved in such organizations presents significant obstacle to monitoring and effective control (Clark & Themudo, 2006), Luthans (2002) opines that synchronous technologies, that facilitate real time communication between the members of virtual teams provide effective coordination. Based on this understanding, organizations must find ways of providing the appropriate resources as integral parts of the design of a modern location (Coakes, Coakes & Rosenberg, 2008).

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that globalization creates prosperity and peaceful movement of humans and capitals across the world. These are also undoubtedly advantageous to organizations operating at global realm. However, these positive changes are not without cost as demonstrated by the negative consequences. Being created via human advancement and social intercourse, negativities of globalization could thus be managed via an inventory of its impacts on every facet of society, particularly within organizations that will keep on being subjected to the dynamics of their operating environment. Therefore, achieving effective organizational communication is more paramount in this era where information and knowledge remain the driving force for organizational survival.

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## **MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION IN THE GLOBALIZED WORK ENVIRONMENT**

The foundation of all interactions among human beings is communication. Therefore, communication remains central to effective management of all forms of organizations. From managerial role to group and team building, socialization into the organization culture, conflict and stress management, managing change and diversity and indeed all interaction within the organization, communication plays tremendous roles. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that poor communication is the source of many organization's problems (Laroche & Rutherford, 2007; Mattson & Stage, 2001).

Since organization can only function effectively under harmonious atmosphere, where everyone works towards attaining organizational goals, sharing information on the desirable role of every constituent is not only essential but continually necessary. To attain enviable success in today's highly competitive atmosphere, organizations must improve their communication systems. The convergence of communication technologies and telecommunication has pushed every organization into the domain where they cannot escape scrutiny of any willing individual, competitor or regulatory authority. The way communication is managed in this open space will thus go a long way in managing beneficial relationships with the internal and external publics who are central to the survival of the organizations. It is thus essential for organizations to change their system and process to meet the challenge of changing time. The designation of the current epoch as knowledge economy presupposes the triumph of knowledge over other factors of production. Knowledge in this sense is referred to as information and not a few scholars have showcased the criticality of information and knowledge to today's organizational life. Hence knowledge management is the

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fulcrum upon which contemporary organizations revolves to leverage themselves into enviable and viable positions within their industries.

Knowledge management entails the ability of organization to gather, create, capture, organize, process, store and share information that facilitate efficient running of the organization. Konana and Balsubrananian (2001) were of the view that "a knowledge economy is one that relies intensively on human skill and creativity, the utilization of human intellectual capital supported by life-long learning and adaptation, the creative exploitation of existing knowledge, and extensive creation of new knowledge through research and development" (Abdullahi & Date, 2009). Knowing the working world or even distant environments that are critical to organizations' success, therefore, requires only the deployment of know-hows, and the pressing of buttons. There is a wealth of information available in the public domain on different countries, their values, business etiquette, and cultures that can be easily accessed and used to understand behaviours (Shriberg & Kumari, 2009). Appropriate use of this means of information gathering will in no small measure solve numerous problems usually posed by cultural and ethical differences for globalized organizations. Heavy investment in human capital is essential because that is the sure path to organizational success in the knowledge economy as the machines cannot function by themselves (Marković, 2008).

The employees take their organizations to enviable height through their comportments within and outside the work environment. The existence of intelligent machines, from the miniaturized forms to gigantic networks, has changed the place, when and how people work. This means that the classical approach of centralization, tall hierarchy, wide span of control, etc. will have to give way to flexible, collaborative and highly

horizontal relationships among managers and their subordinates. Cragan, Kasch and Wright (2009) for instance, believe that rather than using initiative-stifling Theory X, organizational success now depend on subjecting workers to a combination of Theory Y and Theory Z. Commenting on the nature of relationship between today's workers and their workplace, Miller (2006: 320) says that the old life-long pattern of Japanese theory Y has been replaced with highly mobile strategy of hip-hopping from one work environment to the other. This, according to her, has led to the conclusion by scholars that we have reached *The Age of Disposable Worker* (Conrad & Poole, 1997); *The End of Employment* (Robert Reich, 2000)

Communication technologies keep changing the face of work environment and workers adaptation to the changes. The last few decades have seen changing nature of organization leaders and workers marked by Generation X and Generation Y. The Generation X leaders and workers, according to Holtzman, Kruger and Stroak (2007), are "skill at supporting and developing a responsive, competent team who can change direction or project quickly. They are egalitarian and not hierarchical in their thinking. In addition, they are adept at accessing information on the Internet via e-mail, and through organization's information systems". The Generation Y workers on the other hand have the following attributes: place more value on work-life balance, flexibility to choose when, where, and how to work, demand increasing technological sophistication, the first generation to grow up with mobile digital technology, thus expect nonstop interaction and cooperation with peers (Cragan, Kasch & Wright, 2009: 310).

Effective communication among workers is essential as the technologies only facilitate but not automatically lead to one. Media richness theory thus makes us believe that technology for communication

in the contemporary work environment will be a function of perception of their richness (D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008). According to D'Urso and Rains media richness theory was designed to "improve organizational information flow by prescribing channel selection procedures for managers to make the most effective use of communication media". They suggest further that "managers should match the level of uncertainty and equivocality in a message/situation with the richness of the media. Since media richness theory places the communication media on a continuum of rich and lean, based on the derivable physical and social cues, media and message characteristics should be balanced by the communicating partners.

The cross cultural nature of globalized organization makes communication a bit problematic, particularly in virtual working structure where the absence of proxemics, kinesics and paralanguage results due to reduction of social cues (Schmidt, 2006). Since such environment presents a unique challenge of evolving a unique style that works equally with everyone, adaptation that underplays differences in demographics and psychographics of worker should be promoted (Gardenswartz & Cheribosque, 2008). Hence, Laroche and Rutherford (2007) propose that communication and interest in multicultural organization can be achieved if organizations:

Provide employees with some background of newcomer.  
Share organizational success stories on teamwork, where fresh ideas and perspectives made a positive difference.  
Provide the opportunity to learn about new cultures through speakers from international operations, movie viewings, books, articles, etc. Provide opportunity for social mixing, for example, ethnic lunches, international holidays, birthday

parties, and team building exercises. Reward collaboration, and reward collaboration across culture.

Globalization of organizations has, therefore, introduced new concepts, processes, methods and ways of doing things. The primacy of knowledge above other factors of production has made information to be central, hence the great investment in technological gadgets to facilitate effective communication. All this has made relationships to be well coordinated, even where workers and teams work in geographically dispersed and at different time zones.

## CONCLUSION

Revolution in information and communication technology has affected virtually every sphere of human and organizational life. A major consequence of this novel development is the transformation of the nature of work from highly manufacturing mode to service provisions. The contemporary working environments are structured along communication networks, which compress time, reduce geographical limitations and facilitate unbridled cooperation and collaboration among distanced co-workers, sometimes working on the same project from different locales. This has resulted into an egalitarian organizational structure as opposed to the classical top-down authoritarian ones.

Beyond information access, technology has created a multicultural working environment with potential for alliance and clash of cultures. How organizations manage this development will go a long way in determining how they grapple with opportunities and challenges inherent in the highly diversified and continually dynamic global market. It has been argued that organizations that work within the ambit of cultural

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divergence hypothesis will be better-off than those working within convergence hypothesis. This respectively will lead to whether organization will engage in ethical relativism or ethical imperialism, with consequences for workers' evaluation of their worth within the organization and motivation to give their best.

Remote working environments also need to be efficiently monitored and workers on telecommuting should be educated on the need to be disciplined in managing their time. This could be achieved via efficient monitoring and incentive system. Essentially, organizations operating in the globalized environment have opportunity to turn their cyberspaces into bulletin boards for the stakeholders. Issues of organizations' mission, vision, values and ethics can be made accessible to all willing persons. Organizations can also promote their goods and services as well as their investment in social capitals through their Websites. This will pass organizations across as responsible corporate citizens and serve as buffer in the adverse times.

Though there are imminent benefits in going global, it comes at a cost. Organizations operating through cyber conduits are liable to invasion of privacy, data thefts and some other heinous cybercrimes. Therefore, organizations should develop countermeasures to wall off cyber criminals. It is also essential for organizations to realise that technological gadgets are not substitutes for human beings. Hence, workers should be accorded their rightful places in the ever dynamic work environments. In effect, human beings should be seen as the greatest resources that can use other resources to achieve organizations' short-term and long-term missions.

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