Deakin Research Online

This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30020864

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2006, Emerald Group Publishing
Adopting reflexive capability in international briefing

Kerry London, *University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia*

Jessica Chen, *University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia*

Nathaniel Bavinton, *University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia*

Acknowledgements

The research described in this paper was carried out by the Australian Cooperative Research Centre for Construction Innovation.

Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of the paper is to investigate the architectural firm's role in the briefing process on international projects and to identify the strategies of successful firms to overcome barriers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A model is developed based on a critique of briefing models and international design management theory. The development of a reflexive capability model borrows cultural theory concepts of capital and reflexivity. The model is based on maximizing reflexive capability through the management of social, cultural and intellectual capital. Two case studies of architectural firms identify barriers during the briefing process and strategies to overcome these barriers. Data collection involved 16 interviews with senior management and design team staff.

**Findings** – There are various barriers and strategies used to achieve success in the briefing process. However, the management of a firm's capital is key to successful briefing on international projects and is a characteristic of reflexive practice. Reflexivity is based in a positive interpretation of change, and a continual responsiveness to change by participants in a system. The study provides useful information on management of the design and briefing stages of international projects.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is limited by the number of case studies used and the difficulty of generalisability of findings.

**Practical implications** – The research is that it provides useful information about how to approach constant change during briefing for the architects and clients who work on international projects.

**Originality/value** – The model is original and has value as it assists in explaining why some firms are more successful than others. The case studies provide new knowledge on international projects and the briefing process. The value of the paper is for the academic community, professionals in the built environment and clients involved in international projects.

Introduction
The last decade has seen an increasing globalisation of architectural, engineering and construction firms in Australia. The export of Australian construction design services has undergone a steady growth of 60 per cent in the last five years. At the same time the value of export from the service sector has decreased from 40 per cent to 22 per cent of the total export value (DFAT, 2003). This decrease in the export of services indicates the increasing significance of the internationalisation of architectural, engineering and construction firms in Australia as a source of the country's export of services. This appears to be an important emerging sector for the economy.

Internationalisation has relevance for both the industry and individual firms. It is an important step towards ensuring improved industry performances. It is also critical for individual firms for two reasons: survival and growth (Akhter, 1995). First, exporting firms are able to relocate their competitive position to be less susceptible to downturns and fluctuations in the domestic markets (El-Higzi, 2003). Second, exporting firms are provided the opportunity to diversify their products and/or services to increase their market share.

The primary issues that confront exporting design consultant firms include cross-cultural business communication and the development of social and business networks with strategic partners and suppliers (Draganich, 1998). These issues can often be traced back to difficulties in achieving client satisfaction. Client satisfaction is impacted by the firm's ability to capture and maintain the client's requirements and organisational objectives. Understanding organisational objectives is aligned to understanding values and culture. (London, 2001) Therefore, the effective management of cross-cultural business communication during the briefing stages of an international project is crucial to the successful outcome of the final design.

The management of the briefing process is without a doubt a complex and dynamic issue, particularly on international projects. International projects are characterized by a high level of uncertainty whereby client's requirements are continuously negotiated, defined and challenged. The continuous negotiation and definition reflects the fact that client's requirements are constantly emerging as a project progresses. Brief development is therefore a dynamic process.

Both the client and the architectural firm are key ingredients to the briefing process. However in many cases it is ultimately the architectural firm that is responsible for the inquiry process and the gathering and synthesising of information so that they can develop the design. Therefore, the responses to the briefing process by architectural firms need to reflect a capability to successfully micro manage this dynamic environment. Nowhere is this capability more needed than on international projects, which have numerous factors that can hinder this process.

Existing literature has identified that financial risks on international projects are potentially higher as there is much more at stake, particularly in Asian markets (Draganich, 1998). Financial issues that firms encounter on international projects typically include difficulties in ensuring the efficiency of contract negotiations and that payments are made on time. That financial issues are riskier on international projects is not to say that such issues are limited to international projects or are less risky on domestic projects. However, financial considerations for exporting firms are intensified, as their ability to enter international markets and achieve sustainability is heavily reliant on their financial capacity. International
projects tend to be larger, more significant and in many cases have a whole nation watching. To be successful in globalisation firms need to manage external social and business relationships, pay keen attention to their reputation and credibility and finally carefully direct and coordinate information and knowledge on projects.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the architectural firm’s role in the briefing process on international projects. We begin by considering some of the key models used to either represent the briefing process or indicate a better way of conducting the briefing process. We then narrow this consideration to those studies and writings which will provide insight to our particular research problem of design management on international projects. In addition we consider theory from sociology and borrow the concepts of capital and reflexivity to develop a model for maximizing reflexive capability through the management of social, cultural and intellectual capital. We conclude with a discussion of two case studies of Australian architectural firms who work on international projects by identifying barriers to the briefing process and the strategies which they use to overcome these barriers. The strategies are then critiqued in light of capital and reflexivity.

**Dynamic briefing models**

A “brief” is the statement of all client objectives and requirements and the process of “briefing” is the transfer of this information to the designer (Gamble and Marosszeky, 1986; Barrat and Stanley, 1996). Various models and descriptions of brief development have been suggested over the past decades and these were all generally divided into two main approaches:

1. those that view the brief as a single event and briefing becomes a stage or stages in the design process (RIBA, 2000; Kagioglou et al., 1998); and
2. those that view the brief as dynamic and as one that develops in a series of stages (Barret et al., 1996; Barret and Stanley, 1999; Kamara, 1999).

The most practical and realistic approach is the notion that the brief is dynamic. Othman et al. (2004) propose the concept of dynamic brief development (DBD) in construction which views the briefing process as one that is ongoing throughout the project lifecycle. DBD is responsive to emerging client requirements in order to facilitate client satisfaction and takes into account many of the problems associated with other models. It suggests the need for a system that manages the changes that arise throughout the briefing process to enable firms to respond more effectively and efficiently in future projects.

There is no doubt that the systematic management of changes within the principles of DBD may lead to highly successful projects. However, the DBD fails to recognise that in practice, feedback does not necessarily flow from client organizations, facilities management and end-users to the design and construction team. There is a lack of consideration that lessons learnt from one project are generally not changed and/or applied onto future projects (London, 1997). Furthermore, each design project is unique in many ways. The lessons that can be learnt from any individual project are directly related to the fundamentals of that specific project. Each design project has its own set of requirements, which are often composed of individual project, business and country culture that are relevant to the specific client and country in question. Therefore, lessons learnt from one project are not necessarily transferable to another (Draganich, 1998; Loosemore, 2001).
One of the problems with many models of the briefing process is the fundamental assumption that procedures and processes should be accurately defined and fixed in function. Deviation from this standard should be minimised to facilitate the continued functioning of the process. DBD acknowledges to an extent the inevitability of modifications to the design brief throughout different phases of its development. However, its focus remains on minimising the impact of changing client desires or situational contexts on the design brief. Othman et al. (2004) have identified the drivers for dynamic brief development as composed of 30 indicators grouped into 13 categories. They were composed of unexpected events that required responses to manage and overcome the issues arising in the briefing process. Significantly, 83.5 per cent of the drivers were negative. Terms such as “unclear”, “uncoordinated”, “inadequate”, “inappropriate”, “lack”, “incomplete”, “incorrect” and “restricted” were used to define the cause of the particular driver for change. It is clear that the fundamental interpretation is that managing change implies a response to a primarily negative situation or experience.

There were only five drivers that suggested either a neutral or positive perception of the potential impacts of change to the briefing or design process. These were comprised of: initiating value engineering changes (Stocks and Singh, 1999), changing government regulation and codes (O'Leary, 1992), upgrading project facilities (CIB, 1996), responding to market demand (Smith and Wyatt, 1998) and meeting new technology changes (O'Leary, 1992).

Projects are about implementing change and occur in a context of continual change. However, when drivers are overwhelmingly represented as negative influences, modifications to the brief are perceived as inconvenience or imbalance – and something that must be managed, controlled or fixed. A more productive understanding of the concept of dynamic is to accept change as fundamental, as constantly occurring, and to embrace it. Rather than dealing and coping with change in a reductionist manner those involved in the briefing process in successful situations tend to embrace the inquiry process. Firms who successfully manage the briefing process are also responsive to consciously micro-managing scenarios where new information comes to light continuously. Therefore, there is the need to examine successful situations in real world practice. To reveal the extent to which firms understand and utilise systems to manage the brief developing drivers and respond to changes in a positive manner.

**International design management**

Rather than simply limit conceptually the briefing process we tend to now think it is important to take a wider perspective and consider the term design management. Design management is the strategy developed by firm's to deliver their design service to clients. This refers to the way in which an organisation's strategic design management policy translates into internal organisational processes affecting individual projects. Design management supports the “selling” of the design service and is integral to the competitive advantage of the organisation. It is similar to the business management concept of strategic management however with a focus on the activity of design. The individual briefing process for one project is an important part of design management, however for the architectural firm and our study in particular the briefing process becomes part of the practices of the whole firm (London et al., 2005).
Design management has had various interpretations of where it sits within other management constructs related to the management activities in the construction industry. It has been considered to be subsumed by project management (Allinson, 1997) or alternatively on an equal standing as project management, construction management and facilities management but subsumed by architectural management (Emmitt, 1999).

According to Allinson (1997):

Design management concerns itself with the design content of project outcomes and the effective management of the design process. In broader terms, it also concerns the “beneficial” capture and effective utilization of the potential to be realized by design expertise and skill.

We tend to accept much of Allinson's interpretation and highlight that for “effective utilisation of the potential to be realised by design expertise and skill”, management of the design process is required both at the individual project level and the strategic level of an organisation. We suspect that firms who achieve long-term sustainability in international markets are constantly adapting their business practices to achieve client satisfaction by a combination of self, market and project needs assessment. All successful firms ultimately achieve this in local markets but what is intensified in the international market is the need for flexibility and adaptability and continual reassessment in response to evolving markets. Flexibility occurs in resource management, design service/solutions and client responsiveness.

The success of the Yokohoma International Port Terminal in Japan well illustrates the responsiveness of an exporting design firm that has incorporated, and benefited from the development of a flexible and innovative organisational structure. The Yokohama project was a large-scale international project that involved multi-actor collaborations between various participants. It presented numerous complex challenges and diverse needs throughout the briefing process. Through a flexible organisational structure that allowed a high degree of originality of design and also a positive response to change, the firm was able to overcome the many challenges presented by the diverse nature and complexity of the project. Consider this quote that identifies the many aspects of a flexible and responsive design structure that were essential to the success of the Yokohama project:

The design process became in itself a process of creating knowledge... organising themselves into arrangements we could not predict at the onset of the project... One can either operate within a linear structure where decisions are made in a hierarchy of command, or within a culture where a more complex system of relationships between team members allows a much higher degree of flexibility, innovation and feedback (Moussavi and Zaera-Polo, 2002, pp. 31, 33).

Client satisfaction on international markets would typically rely on individual project success and a key part of how project success is achieved is through project and strategic design management. It has been identified that many of the factors affecting project management differ from country to country and project to project (Draganich, 1998; Loosemore, 2001). Similarly, design management may be affected by country and project type. Therefore, the continuous adaptation of the export enterprise part of a firm to changing market conditions
and the new knowledge generated from each project is fundamental to achieving client satisfaction (Figure 1).

**Cross-cultural communication in design management**

Cross-cultural communication is regularly identified as a significant barrier encountered in the internationalisation of design firms. Communication is a fairly large concept to deal with and has many facets to it. Not only is communication important to coordinate in-house design teams and inter firm specialist teams, it is also important at the strategic level to develop design briefs. Communication in the design process has long been considered a complex and critical problem where the communication gap between expectations and realisation is central (Brown, 2001; Emmit, 1999).

The receptiveness by designers to knowledge held by others is a key issue for design management. A study designed to explore the integration of the supply chain in the construction industry (London, 2002), highlighted that communication during the management of the design process when there are teams of people working across organisations is affected by the culture within various groups. These cultural issues were related to organisational culture and affected the assumptions various team members had of one another. The communication between design participants is also affected by language and culture. The information handling between designers within a design team is characterised by creative, visionary, spatial, abstract thinking people who have a high level of technical knowledge and experience (Otter and Prins, 2002).

The internationalisation of the design firm has heightened the need for an acute awareness of communication. As the London (2002) study indicated, within the one national culture a multidisciplinary design team will experience a variety of complex issues that hinder effective and efficient communication. Howes and Tah (2003) identified the added difficulty of communicating across international boundaries as further compounding the problem through the introduction of different national cultures, etiquettes and languages. In a brief discussion, this study attempted a superficial cataloguing of the variations between country-business cultures, rather than a more in depth exploration of the impacts of cross-cultural communication difficulties on the design process in its various stages of development.

In a more recent study London et al. (2005) revealed the important distinction between “surface” level communication and “deeper” levels of communication. “Surface” level communication consists of strict translation between languages of particular words. “Deeper” levels of communication are based on a level of cultural understanding that takes into account the various subtleties and nuances of meaning related to words within culturally specific situations. The study identified that communication between cultures occurs in three different contexts between: national cultures (including language differences, cultural understandings and social customs); corporate business cultures (management styles, processes and procedures); and between project cultures (fields of expertise, niche specialisation and conceptual compatibility and continuity). These three contexts regularly overlap and interpenetrate to create the complex field that is cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural business communication on international projects is an important part of managing design on a project basis and managing for design on an organizational level.
There are various strategies undertaken by organizations to manage design at both project and organisational levels. Within the context of design management, effective cross-cultural business communication becomes an important part of the organization’s ability to develop knowledge to export, enter new international markets and to then maintain a strategic position within various markets. Information internalisation and the translation of information into relevant knowledge have been identified as an important part of the internationalisation process of SMEs (Morgan et al., 2003; Knight and Liesch, 2002). The capacity to efficiently overcome the challenges associated with cross-cultural communication in international contexts is greatly impacted by the extent to which firms can identify, maximise and utilise forms of social, cultural and economic capital.

**The strategic management of social, cultural and intellectual capital**

As indicated by London et al. (2005), there are three types of non-economic capital that are important for achieving client satisfaction on international projects including; social, cultural and intellectual.

**Social capital**

Social capital (SC) is the creation of personal relationships and networks based on trust built over time. Working in a network helps spread risks and marketing costs. Social capital has relevance for the project team networks and the organisation and client networks. According to Cohen and Prusak (2001, p. 4):

Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible.

In a study on the internationalisation of Danish architectural firms, Skaates et al. (2002) saw national construction industries as milieux or groups characterised by geographical areas. These milieus had a network of actors with a set of “rules and norms regulating the interactions between these actors” (Cova and Ghauri, 1996). Consistent with Cohen and Prusak’s definition, Skaates et al. (2002) defined social capital as recognition by other actors within the construction industry that the firm is a member of “their inner circle due to one’s dispositions...or one’s way of working and tacit knowledge”.

**Cultural capital**

Cultural capital (CC) entails physical “dispositions” such as “building visible buildings, winning design competitions, or obtaining important tenders” (Skaates et al., 2002). These concepts are premised on the reputation of the firm in that the success of marketing architectural services “depends on the firm’s ability to sell and deliver a credible promise” (Lowendahl, 2000).

It differs from social capital in that it is the high profile of a firm’s projects that marks the firm as having acquired a high level of cultural capital. Therefore, cultural capital is the firm’s highly regarded past achievements that create trust and credibility. This is different from trust that is formed through relationships or networks, which is social capital. A firm acquires cultural capital through building successful facilities, achieved partially through the
public response to a facility’s cultural appropriateness, and partially through the design communities’ recognition of innovation in design. It can be likened to achieving a foothold in a market, where success often engenders further success.

Bourdieu (as cited in Swartz, 1997), however, states that cultural capital is not only limited to such “physical dispositions”, whereby it also takes form in another dimension as the embedded “culture” of a firm … it refers to the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding”. Therefore, a firm is also able to accumulate its cultural capital by employing and/or retaining staff of the desired “culture”.

**Intellectual capital**

Intellectual capital (IC) is an organisation's collective skills, experience, competences and knowledge and is critical to the sustainability of firms, particularly in international markets. According to Stewart (1997), the strength of a firm lies within its intangible assets, where he posits that intellectual capital of a firm is “the talents of its people, the efficacy of its management systems and the character of its relationships to its customers”.

The understanding of cultural issues and market knowledge is one of the key success factors for firms when exporting their services (Draganich, 1998). A firm’s market knowledge and understanding of cultural issues typically arises from individual experiences with particular markets, clients and projects. General knowledge of a foreign market and the client is improved through successive completion of projects and these experiences create tacit knowledge. Such tacit knowledge will contribute towards achieving increased project performance.

Financial capital is significant to all three types of non-economic capital as ultimately all three types are aimed at creating financial capital for the firm (refer to Figure 2). The notion that “economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital” and that these other types are in fact “transformed, disguised and forms of economic capital” is not a new concept at all (Bourdieu, 1987). For example, economic capital makes possible the investment in cultural capital by making possible the investment of time needed to accumulate cultural capital.

The relationships between cultural, social and intellectual capital are complex (Bourdieu, 1987). The interrelationships between the types of capital is critical towards achieving effective briefing and design processes and attaining client satisfaction through project performance in terms of both facility and process performance. The performance is measured by achievement of project objectives, which should relate to client organisational objectives. The process performance is primarily measured by efficiency and effectiveness considerations. To achieve efficiency and effectiveness the working relationships between project team members throughout the briefing process is often critical. The development and enhancement of social and business relationships is affected by social capital. Social capital can also be enhanced by an effective exchange of intellectual capital.

Briefing involves the development of clear client organisational objectives and project organisational objectives, which is impacted by an understanding of the values of the organization. To understand organisational values an understanding of the client’s culture is
critical. Culture is of course both country and organisational and ultimately there is a project culture. It is not difficult to see that social and cultural capital can perhaps play a significant role in project performance. Clearly, intellectual capital is critical to the execution of a project. The concept of intellectual capital is not new either and the study of knowledge management is quite a large field and much has been written on this concept.

The fundamental barrier within the briefing process has been described as the complex field of interrelating cross-cultural communication barriers. It has also been discussed that the extent to which a firm is able to strategically manage its non-economic capital resources – social, cultural and intellectual capital – reflects its ability to efficiently and effectively overcome such challenges. Furthermore, we propose that the capacity to positively and flexibly react to change, and responsively allocate and distribute the different forms of capital is a useful measure of a firm’s reflexive capability. In saying this it becomes clear that a firm’s reflexive capability is a critical factor in its capacity to effectively overcome the complexities of the briefing process, especially in international contexts.

Figure 3 summarises the conceptual model of client satisfaction through effective briefing process related to types of capital.

**Reflexive capability model**

Reflexivity is a term which comes to us from sociology research and is a useful concept to borrow. According to Kenway and McLeod (2004) there are three main ways in which it is commonly used in sociological research. Key protagonists in the reflexivity field are Bourdieu (1987) and Giddens (1991). Kenway and McLeod (2004) when citing Pillow (2003) also suggest that “reflexivity is a much used term, over determined and under-defined with a multivalent lineage…”

For the purposes of this paper Giddens (1991) definition of reflexivity within the context of modernity is most useful. He suggests “modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information and knowledge” (Giddens, 1991, p. 20). To be able to chronically revise means a continual responsiveness to change by participants in the system. Participants need to have some sense of self-awareness about what practices they are embedded within and be conscious or perceptive of that constantly changing environment and the various processes. Participants not only need this openness to change but also the skills, mechanisms and culture that allow institutional change. To allow for change does not necessarily mean that everything is in a state of flux. This suggests that there is little need for learning and that past experience does not contribute to our current practices. Therefore, there are core principles that are not subject to change and boundaries should be placed around elements that are considered unchangeable.

Within our study we are suggesting that a reflexive capability to the briefing process by architects is needed. The ensuing manner in which they strategically manage social, cultural and intellectual capital is highly appropriate to the complex and dynamic environment of international projects. A reflexive capability of the collective firm and its institutionalized culture is the ideal. In reality, architectural firms are typically responsive by nature but not necessarily constantly vigilant of conscious responsiveness within such a micro-managed
strategic. A reflexive capability, however, is a characteristic of successful and innovative firms internationalising and working within global models of practice.

There are three key dimensions to reflexivity:

1. **Awareness:**
   - knowing that the organization has a briefing process practice; and
   - knowing that the briefing process is changeable.

2. **Responsiveness:**
   - individual and collective corporate openness to change;
   - organizational business culture is supportive to change; and
   - individual skill levels support change.

3. **Adaptability based on values:**
   - conscious identification of core principles which are non changeable versus organizational practices which are changeable; and
   - accommodating and implementing change within the boundaries of the reflexive model (actualising a pro-reactive attitude towards dynamic change).

This is quite easily translatable to the briefing process and the architectural firms self micro-management. As many researchers previously have either explicitly or implicitly highlighted – the briefing process is dynamic. A true understanding of dynamic is to accept change as a positive rather than a negative characteristic. Rather than dealing, coping and managing in a reductionist manner the challenge of effective brief development is to embrace its dynamic nature. Awareness, responsivity, adaptability all contribute to the consciously determined micro-management of the process. It involves individuals who are highly aware of both the nature of the process, and their own role in the process. Furthermore, they are able to separate these two elements to consider them rationally and objectively and to understand the relationships between the two.

To actualise this understanding is to perceive that any given position in the briefing process requires a specific yet interrelating mix of various forms of capital. Indeed, reflexive capability of the individual (as a product of the three characteristics outlined above) can itself be considered a specific skill and therefore a form of intellectual capital. It is also a form of social capital as a particular way of relating to colleagues and developing flexible networks. Likewise, it is a form of cultural capital in that it is a detailed awareness and understanding of project and organisational cultures of the firm. The ensuing culture of change that necessarily accompanies a creative and enquiring briefing process should not always be viewed as a problem situation. The reflexive capability approach is appropriate to all briefing processes. However, what is speculated on is that the reflexive capability is particularly intrinsic to architectural firms who work globally and who are successful in that process.

How realistic is this model? What happens in reality is now considered for two case studies. There are many unique characteristics which international projects present. These characteristics include different players, country characteristics, legal and contractual environments, regulatory constraints and a higher likelihood of more players from more countries. The model is concerned with the architectural firm's response to the globalisation of architectural services and is delimited to their role in the process. This of course does not negate that other professionals have a critical role and a study exploring their role on
international projects would be equally valid; however, this study is unapologetic about the role that the architectural firm plays on the international project and the briefing process.

Methodology

A case study methodology was used to study two architectural design firms who have been successful in entering and achieving some measure of sustainability in international markets. The firms were investigated in-depth to describe and explain how successful design firms internationalise and manage social, cultural and intellectual capital. The single most important source of data for this research was in-depth, personal interviews. The study consisted of interviews with senior managers and design team staff. The goals for the senior management level were to clarify why the organisations are working in international markets, to explain policies, procedures and performance measurement related to international work, to identify from their perspective the difficulties and successful strategies for various markets. For the design team level the goals were to gain insight into the staff’s experiences of projects and processes including difficulties and successful strategies on international projects. Descriptions of the following concepts have been completed for each case:

- organisation's experiential and market knowledge & design management, policy and procedures;
- internationalisation processes and project processes; and
- successful strategies and inhibitors to success.

The analytical methodology has been drawn primarily from the research perspective of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994; Glaser, 1992). This project was developed as exploratory and inductive. In response to this concern grounded theory was used as a means of data organisation and theory generation, particularly useful in its capacity for providing structured guidelines for conceptual relationships and explanatory frameworks (Charmaz, 2000). In keeping with the methodological framework of case studies, grounded theory assumes the individual case to be an autonomous unit of action and therefore an independent unit of investigation.

Case studies – discussion and analysis

Case study 1 involved conducting four interviews with senior staff and three with design team staff. It is an architectural firm with approximately 75 staff. It has one office located in an Australian capital city and has been exporting primarily to China in the last ten years. It has three main divisions; urban design, landscape design and architectural design. Typically the firm operates internationally through third-party relationships.

In case study 2, four interviews were conducted with senior staff and five with design staff. However, it is considerably more difficult in case 2 to define the staff interviewed to these categories, with several senior staff having experience as designers and working closely with design teams on projects, and many design staff periodically in charge of various divisions of the firm. Indeed, the difficulty in categorising levels of staff within firm 2 can be partially attributed to their greater reflexivity – individuals frequently move between projects, tasks and functions within processes. The firm is multinational in scope with offices in all the major cities in Australia, and has increasingly been exporting internationally for the past 20
years. Typically, the firm operates as a global group with offices in six major international markets that act to facilitate work and access clients, with design “outsourced” to Australia.

Within a methodological framework based around the constructs of internationalisation, design management and market knowledge, the centrality of the briefing process was a dominant and reoccurring theme. Furthermore, the interrelation of the briefing process with emergent constructs concerned cross-cultural communication as the primary barrier faced by exporting design firms. The briefing process was identified as a complex site and a centrally important juncture in the firm’s ability to achieve client satisfaction through project performance. There are three problematic processes that the firm’s experience on international projects that related specifically to the briefing process. These processes take place in the three stages of:

1. Obtaining client’s requirements.
2. Transferring information within the firm.
3. Translating of client’s requirements into a facility.

Each of these stages will now be discussed to highlight the challenges that the two architectural firms examined experience on international projects and the strategies that each firm has utilised to overcome such barriers. The strategies of both firms revolved around the strategic management of social, cultural and intellectual capital. We propose that the extent to which these forms of capital can be strategically managed is a primary indicator of a firm’s reflexive capability within the briefing process. It should be noted that a firm’s reflexive capability places them on a continuum, which is not clearly demarcated into definite typologies. In keeping with a positive interpretation of change and the centrality of an adaptive framework for managing change, the following two case studies assist in a rudimentary outline of the reflexive capability continuum.

The different ways that the two firms conduct work in international markets – a high frequency of dependence on local joint ventures for firm 1, and local offices on the ground outsourcing work to Australia for the firm 2 – provide differentiated contexts for the briefing processes that they experience. Nonetheless, despite quite different modes of entry and organisational strategies, they encounter relatively similar barriers impacting on their briefing processes. Furthermore, the manner in which they have responded to these challenges, while different in approach, are relatively comparable in their underlying principles. Primarily, the measures taken to overcome the difficulties arising from the international briefing process revolved around the strategic management of social, cultural and intellectual capital resources within the firm.

There are two main barriers that firms experience during the early stages of brief development, during which firms undergo the process of obtaining key information in relation to clients’ requirements. These barriers consist of difficulties that arise from geographic and cultural distance and the subtle and nuanced differences in meanings between cultures (Figure 4).

The most obvious and fundamental barrier – geographic and cultural distance from the market and client – was experienced by firm 1 in relation to difficulties arising from the language difference. Overcoming this barrier required that material be translated between languages whenever information was flowing in either direction. However, interpenetrating
this communication between countries and languages was elements of niche specialisation, because “[the translator] was an architect and she didn't necessarily understand all the form of the landscape architectural component”.

Thus, difficulties arise in the design team knowing their ideas have been accurately conveyed. Concerns were raised in regard to whether the translator understood the conceptual field and if the concepts were correctly translated into the host language. This scenario represents an interpenetration of at least two of the cultural contexts outlined above – between countries and between conceptual fields. Communication in such a heavily inter-cultured context places limits on the reflexive capability of designers. This is because both the linguistic barriers and the limited conceptual continuity negatively impact the capacity for an effective two-way interaction between designers and clients. This problem is attributed mostly to cultural distance – primarily linguistic – and therefore requiring a translator, which was then exasperated by differences in niche specialisation.

To overcome these difficulties, the firm is structured according to a model that usually relies on involvement with a localised third-party. This third party generally possesses more intimate local knowledge of the cultural and geographic contours of the market in question. Such relationships ensure a minimum level of cultural understanding and linguistic ability is made available to the firm in relation to the briefing process and in dealing with non-English speaking clients in general. In regard to its own staff, the firm attributed a high status to forms of intellectual capital such as cultural understanding, that in conjunction with a bilingual capacity, can help facilitate smooth and efficient “deep” cross-cultural communication. The firm maximised this reflexive capacity for direct communication with clients through the acquisition of intellectual capital in terms of accessing staff that are multi-lingual and also possess a high degree of cultural understanding.

Unlike firm 1, firm 2 did not experience major difficulties in relation to linguistic differences as the firm generally only worked with clients who speak the same language. This is an outcome of the firm’s organisation and strategy as a global entity and the desire to do the majority of work with “international clients”. These “international clients” also operate across international markets and therefore have a capacity to conduct business in the global language of English. Despite being able to converse in the same language as the client, the firm still faces difficulties. This was caused by the design team’s inability to have “face-to-face” contact with the client due to geographic distance resulting from its very global “outsourcing” model.

Technical implications from not being able to communicate directly with the client presented other challenges such as the possibility of design staff misinterpreting the “essence” of the client’s requirements. These technical implications include differences in time zones, accents and disparate levels of information technology. As such, the firm placed much dependence on the intellectual capital of individual staff members to develop and manage standardised information technology across the global group. Furthermore, the firm relied on global IT networks, consisting of locally embedded individuals to connect various international offices. Through these social networks cultural capital in the form of cultural understanding and experiential knowledge is made available to the global group as shared resource. The global/local network therefore served to ensure consistency while allowing continual exchange of ideas between staff and client thereby facilitating the capturing of client’s requirements. Easy access and contact with a wide array of cultural
knowledge, experience and information concerning project specifics promotes faster, innovative resolutions. Thus, the firm was able to react more quickly to client's requests throughout the briefing process.

Another barrier confronted the firms apart from the obvious challenges of language differences and technical complexities that arise from telecommunication problems. The firms experienced difficulties in gaining a “deeper” level of understanding local context of clients. As highlighted previously, “deeper” levels of understanding are based on a level of cultural understanding that takes into account the various subtleties and nuances of meaning related to words and culturally specific situations.

Firm 1 utilized social capital in recognising the importance of developing social networks at the professional level to access clients. At the informal social level social capital was utilised to facilitate a greater understanding of client needs and desires outside of the formalised and restrictive “office and business” conceptual space. In particular, they took the opportunity to utilise the informal social interaction to understand the nuances of the host culture. The firm effectively exercised cultural capital through the demonstration of appreciation and awareness for the country in many aspects that ranged from design issues to style of eating to details of ritual and custom. This strategy gained the firm an insight into the culture. More importantly, it enabled the firm to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of that culture that is difficult to achieve inside the formal business setting. Thereby strengthening the social networks based in the social capital of trust and respect through the exchange of cultural capital. Similarly, the extent to which the clients have an appreciation for Australian culture largely determined the capacity to exchange cultural capital into useable social capital.

Firm 2, however, overcame the same barrier in obtaining “deeper” local engagement through the utilisation of intellectual capital. To facilitate cultural understanding of host country context, the firm brought into the office a local who had sound understanding of customs and practices of the host country. This local person served to answer questions that designers had concerning local contexts. This is an example of the firm’s exchange of intellectual capital to gain cultural capital and therefore acquire a deeper understanding of local context. This was achieved as design staff was provided the opportunity to have direct access to a “local” with first hand knowledge of the culture and environment. The reflexive capability of the design staff was enhanced in relation to the briefing process by having someone immediately on hand to answer questions and provide detailed advice.

A second barrier to the internal information flow in the briefing process relates to the complexities of that flow. The fact that only one person had “been over there and liaised with the client” makes the briefing process more difficult. This is because culturally specific values and interpretations are the textures that give language its richness and largely determine what meanings are available and how different people will interpret those meanings (Figure 5).

Therefore, both the firms’ reliance on one key staff member to be the client contact as well as to manage the internal flow of information was felt recognised as problematic. Major concerns were raised in regard to the person's interpretations, which were “slightly different” with “slightly different nuances”, and were affected by both personal interpretation and linguistic limits. While it is to be expected that client contact is
considered an important niche specialisation. However, it appears that it was less often taken into account that the same individual would be the primary source of information concerning the brief for the design staff. The ability to interact efficiently with clients and to overcome cross-cultural difficulties is not a guarantee of the capacity to transmit relevant information within the briefing process. In some cases it could even work against it.

Firm 1 displayed recognition of the importance of recruiting staff with a wide array of forms of intellectual capital that are relevant to internationalisation. This could refer to linguistic capacity, experience of other cultures through overseas work or extensive travel. There is also a tacit understanding demonstrated by the firm that forms of intellectual capital somehow transfers across borders and cultures. For example, cultural understanding as intellectual capital is regarded as a general ability rather than a culturally specific commodity. These “skills” – based on experiential knowledge – are the primary factors in the allocation of tasks and selection of design teams for projects.

Firm in case 2 utilises senior staff in the crucial interface position that have previous design experience, and therefore first hand knowledge of the design process. A certain degree of social capital is required of this position in facilitating an effective interactive information flow by understanding the need for developing trust and respect in interpersonal relationships. Similarly, cultural capital is also a valuable resource in providing the capacity for “deep” rather than simply “surface” level communication through awareness of culturally specific nuance and subtlety. Not “every person” can manage the difficulties of cross-cultural communication related to direct client contact. A lack of cultural understanding can create a situation that can “end up in disaster”. The firm also acknowledges the need for specific forms of intellectual capital in the form of “technical knowledge” and recognising that cultural understanding is itself a form of intellectual capital.

Both firms involved in the study provide examples of the importance of recognising the social, cultural and intellectual capital requirements of specific positions in the briefing process. The firms also recognised the significance of placing an appropriately skilled individual in those specific positions of the briefing process. Nowhere was this more evident than in the crucial interface position between the internal and external information flows. For both firms, client contact was primarily conducted by a single individual in that all information entering the briefing process information flow passed primarily through a single point. This single person was typically the only person who had direct face-face contact with clients who also acted as the project manager, transferring the relevant information to other design staff.

This is not to say that it was the same individual every time, but rather that the process created a singular interface position, which could only be filled by one individual at a time. As a result that individual position required a specific array of interrelating social, cultural and intellectual capital in order to effectively fulfil the requirements of that role and render the entire process functional.

Both firms’ reliance on one staff member to be the primary client contact and to manage the briefing process also resulted in a separation for the design staff from a direct source of information or feedback. This separation produced a relationship to the project for
designers that they characterised as “abstract” or “pretend”, implying that it lacked any material reality and context, and was instead just “lines on a page”.

For firm 1 their third-party relationship is relied on heavily to supply a detailed translation of the client's needs and requirements. The partner then, through discussion with the third party, develops a more detailed understanding. On a similar level, a strategy for minimising the effects of designer's disassociation from client and site is the utilisation of informal and face-to-face social interactions to share and maximise experiential knowledge. Thus, individual experiences of foreign markets are continuously transformed into valuable resources for the firm. In both instances what is depended on is a high level of trust in the social networks that information passed on to designers is relevant and accurate. For the majority of designers in the absence of direct first-hand experience, the social interactions were the primary source of understanding local contexts. Therefore, trust was central in facilitating the effective flow of information in the briefing process.

Firm 2 utilized social capital to overcome the situation. The positive perception senior staff hold of their part in this information flow is particularly evident. This confidence in their role and indeed in the entire briefing process is an indicator of their evaluation of its success as determined by outcome or end result – If the end result of the design process is a satisfied client, than their role in the development of the design brief has been done effectively. To an extent this confidence is the result of a high degree of trust in the designers as a team; that the firm culture promotes clearly identified roles within a team-orientated working environment, and design staff has the required skills to perform these roles at a high level (Figure 6).

The third barrier involved the difficulties of translating the clients’ requirements in terms of producing design solutions that matched the client's organisational culture and values. The two firms experienced different difficulties in relation to this issue however the proposed strategies by both firms for overcoming the difficulties of capturing client's requirements revolved around the strategic management of social and cultural capital.

In firm 1, a discrepancy appeared between management and design level in terms of general employees being aware of design philosophy. This refers to the dynamics of internal information flows within the firm in terms of what design management believes is necessary and useful information for designers to have. The overall strategic goals of the firm are not generally communicated throughout the organization. The design team staff are thus operating with a less complete or long-term set of parameters. This indicates a hierarchical relationship between senior partners as responsible for the management of the design firm, and design staff as integral components of the management of the design process. Such a relationship can work against reflexive capability by encouraging an atmosphere of limited information access that can minimise individual initiative.

It was recognised by the senior management that cultural understanding revolved not simply around linguistic differences or nuance associated with a country's cultural meanings. It also referred to an understanding of how the client in the other country did business. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the various levels involved in the briefing process in order to develop the required awareness and responsivity that engenders reflexive capability in the briefing process. It is not obvious that there is a potentially difficult gap in understanding between business cultures and day-to-day expectations when
Attention is focused on the more readily visible and major cultural differences associated with linguistics. The development of the brief is not only dependent on functional requirements but also an understanding of clear client organisational goals and values. Client organisational goals and values are reflected in its business/organisational culture. Accordingly, the firm utilized social capital in the form of informal social networks to gain understanding into the client’s organisational or business culture, which was the firm’s way of capturing the client’s requirements.

For firm 2, the design staffs’ desire to be “responsive to... local context” presented challenges relating both to environmental as well as cultural concerns. The potential for designing a facility that would not fit the local cultural and environmental contexts was one of the major risks faced by the firm. This issue could negatively impact on the firm's reputation and marketable image. In international markets the capacity to deliver suitable and appropriate built forms is paramount, and essential to attaining client satisfaction. As this is the end goal of the briefing process, it can be understood that managing risks such as this are the primary function of the briefing process. To this end, the designer's ability to understand and incorporate the local contexts into the design is a fundamental aspect of the briefing process, and that process is all about the transfer of detail.

The firm thus utilized social capital to gain client respect for the proposed design solutions. The high level of trust provided, which was acquired through the firms’ relationship with the client, enabled the design team the confidence to express their design opinions without having the stress of receiving heavy criticisms. This form of client respect was felt to be of high significance and assisted design staff in the design development process, as staff were able to be more responsive to the client's needs. The trust exhibited by the clients in the designer’s capacity was instrumental in the design team being able to exercise creativity and artistic skill to produce innovative design solutions. In this particular instance, innovation in design was specifically part of the brief and therefore, social capital in the form of trust was essential in translating the brief into a facility that matched or exceeded client expectations. Furthermore, an element of cultural capital in the form of the firm's reputation and marketable image also influenced the amount of trust demonstrated by the client group. Previously successful built facilities having contributed to the development of the firm's reputation as professional and capable of innovative original design.

Conclusion

The briefing process is dynamic. Brief development takes place in three separate yet interrelated processes: obtaining client's requirements, transferring information within the firm, and translating client's requirements into a facility. That these processes are identified as separate is not to imply that they are discrete or relate to one another in a linear progression. Client's requirements and the development of design solutions constantly change, and no phase is ever entirely complete until the project is finished. Each of the three processes that constitute the brief development is itself a process of communication. International projects can potentially involve various cross-cultural communication difficulties that must be negotiated. This factor has been identified as the primary challenge associated with the different elements of briefing process. The multiple interpenetrating contexts of cross-cultural communication in international projects are what mark the briefing process as such a thoroughly complex site. Briefing processes are heavily
characterised by the need for efficient communication between cultural groups and fields and for the establishment of effective information flows.

The way to overcome cross-cultural communication difficulties and develop effective information flows is through the practice of a reflexive model. Reflexivity is based on a positive interpretation of change, and a continual responsiveness to change by participants in the system. The outcomes of reflexive capability in the briefing process and firm operational procedure concern the notion that improvements in system function and individual performance can occur within the lifecycle of a project not simply between projects. To maximise reflexive capability participants need self-awareness about what practices they are embedded within and to be conscious or perceptive of constantly changing environments. Participants not only need this openness to change but also the adaptive skills and an organisational culture and procedural mechanisms that facilitate institutional change. Elements of the process are considered as components of a malleable system that are evaluated according to their function and on the basis of their contribution to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the process.

The primary methods for overcoming cross-cultural communication barriers within the briefing processes were related to the strategic management of social, cultural and intellectual capital within the firm. Furthermore, the strategic management of social, cultural and intellectual capital leads to the development of increasing reflexive capability within the briefing process. They facilitate the primary characteristics of awareness, responsivity and adaptability and allow the immediate micromanagement and channelling of change toward areas that are accommodated by the reflexive capability model. Primarily, this is through overcoming barriers associated with attaining and maintaining two-way interactive information flows in cross-cultural communication environments.

Through an understanding of the nature of communication at its social and cultural elements it is possible to be consciously aware of the complexities of cross-cultural communication, including the ability to perceive and address potential difficulties before they manifest into problems. Management of social, cultural and intellectual capital involves understanding the interrelationships between forms of capital, so as to be able to maximise advantage through the utilisation and leveraging of one form of capital to gain another. It also involves understanding the dynamics of the briefing process so as to be able to identify the requirements of any given point in the internal and external flows of information, and the internal flexibility to place the appropriately skilled individual in that position.

A reflexive model is most effective when the project is considered a unique entity. An effective reflexive model necessitates processes to be understood as a structured arrangement of relationships between roles that have specific requirements related to the unique characteristics of the particular project. Furthermore, it implies a need for an awareness of the skills, and capabilities of individual staff in order to place them in appropriately suitable positions. The appropriate placement of staff members facilitates the capacity for individuals to respond accordingly and instantaneously in any unique situation that may arise in the briefing process. This is enabled through the development, enhancement and maintenance of experiential knowledge as a resource and the development of reflexive (open) processes and systems. It is these two elements of the reflexive model that transcend individual projects and promote the development of the firm’s reflexive capability.
The rigid and formulaic nature of linear development based on the premise of improving the briefing process in response to the lessons learned from previous projects can itself prevent the maximisation of reflexive capability. The implementation of perceived improvements to project processes following feedback from users or clients may potentially inhibit the efficient function of those processes in light of different project or situational parameters. Assuming a priori that the lessons learned from one project will automatically benefit the next and that those lessons from one project need to be applied so as to fulfil the potential for the linear development of the “dynamic” briefing processes is potentially detrimental or disruptive.

The reflexive capability model implies that lessons learned from each project are applied within that project to immediately adjust the functional parameters. Furthermore, lessons learned – as effective responses to specific problems encountered – are collected as resources to be used in future projects according to the situational need. A brief is constructed for the specific project in question that fulfils its requirements. As new requirements come to light the potential exists for the brief to be altered to accommodate new needs. The materials for constructing an adequate brief are in fact individuals with particular arrays and forms of social, cultural and intellectual capital, placed into certain relationships with one another. These individuals and relationships are organised according to the desire to maximise interactive information flows. At the end of the day the briefing process is all about delivering accurate and relevant detail to the design team concerning the client’s desires and needs. Adjustments to the processes and procedures as the brief develops occur through the individuals recognising change and adapting their roles accordingly. Therefore, the reflexive response by individuals within processes enables the more efficient gathering, transferring and translating of client requirements into processes and facilities more likely to meet or exceed client satisfaction.

![Diagram of briefing process and culture related to client satisfaction on international projects](image)

*Figure 1* Briefing process and culture related to client satisfaction on international projects
Figure 2: Cultural, intellectual and social capital interactions to support financial capital
Figure 3 Briefing process (client satisfaction) related to types of non-economic capital
Figure 4 Key barriers and proposed strategies in the process of obtaining client’s requirements
Figure 5: Key barriers and proposed strategies in the process of managing information flow within firms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BARRIER 1: Primary source of information through one personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CASE 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Some people aren’t as good conveying the client’s requests. Some pick it up really well and other’s don’t and can’t convey it to the people who are going to work on the project.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CASE 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'There are points where I’m the only person who’s had a face to face discussion with anyone [from the client group] and I am continuously reinterpreting stuff.'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PROCESS:** Transferring information (client’s requirements) within the firm

**BARRIER 1: Staff dissociation from the source**

| **CASE 1** |
| 'You’re not getting a lot of feedback that makes a lot of sense...It would be like a gathering of everything for us to piece it together.' |
| **CASE 2** |
| 'My preference is...to deal with the client, go to site, and at the end see the finished product. I’m quite happy to do international work but it is like dealing with pretend projects.' |

**Strategy**

- Strategic placement within processes of individuals possessing the right type of intellectual, social and cultural capital
  
  | **CASE 1** |
  | 'Our best person for the job is the most important thing. We have people who are stronger in design up front, fantastic in design development and documentation and good at contractual issues.' |
  
  | **CASE 2** |
  | 'Every project you’ve got to get the right sort of people at every point...It’s about developing up a mix that suits that particular project, client group and the other people within the actual project.' |

- The use of *social capital* to create trust in internal communication
  
  | **CASE 1** |
  | 'When anybody goes over there, they come back, we have drinks here on a Friday night and they show the photographs - we have discussions saying look we’re doing this project etc..’ |
  
  | **CASE 2** |
  | 'All client contact is through me. It was all just - I fed the bits “’ needed back. It seemed to work very easily and there wasn’t that much coordination involved’ |
Figure 6: Key barriers and proposed strategies in the process of translating client’s requirements into facilities

References


Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2003), “Trade in services, Australia 2001-2002”, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Barton, .


Further Reading


