

Division of Research  
Graduate School of Business Administration  
The University of Michigan

April 1975

CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS OF  
THE FOREIGN EXPATRIATE IN THE UNITED STATES

Working Paper No. 100

Herbert W. Hildebrandt

The University of Michigan

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Even the most casual reader and listener cannot help but discover that the majority of large multinational companies of the world are headquartered in the United States. The parent is inevitably American; the daughters live far from home.

The assertion above is formed on hard fact.

But even an insular and myopic observer is beginning to see foreign multinational subsidiaries in the United States. They are here. Indeed, ethnocentric American managers are being forced to rearrange their perceptions to consider also the foreign national and his problems rather than limiting the view to the expatriate American in other parts of the world.

Our concern in this paper is therefore twofold: first, to view some of the cultural communication problems of the foreign expatriate in the United States, specifically the problems of German employees in an American daughter company. Our touchstone definition of a daughter company is a wholly owned subsidiary where senior managerial positions are held by nationals of the mother company. The term communication is a bit more rubbery: we will focus upon the interpersonal exchanges, oral or written, which occur between German expatriates, American nationals, or Germans in the foreign headquarters company. By cultural we mean the total system of values and habits stored up implicitly and explicitly by a German national which he brings along to the host country.

Second, we express the concern that the literature of business is replete with excursions through the economic, financial, marketing, and operational alleys of multinational business, yet is neglectful of the communication differences around which many managerial problems rotate. We emphasize that it is through communication that nationals and expatriates relate to their

mother company, their immediate supervisor, or their colleagues in the affiliate company, and furthermore that intercultural communication does have an emphatic impact on relationships between parent and daughter companies. To identify some of the oral and written communication differences is, therefore, a second goal of this paper.

We will divide our discussion into several parts: (1) the method of research employed; (2) cultural communication problems of the German expatriate; (3) oral and written problems of communication of German expatriates; and (4) discussion and recommendations.

## II. METHOD OF RESEARCH

The interface of the two cultures noted above was analyzed by (1) an intensive examination through interviews and visits to certain American parent companies; (2) several months of study in Germany interviewing American expatriates working in German subsidiaries; (3) intensive investigation of certain German affiliates in the United States; and (4) progressive interviews with German expatriates in the United States working as employees of an American subsidiary.

It is not our intent to identify the companies wherein the interviews were conducted, but the majority of work on this project was conducted within the chemical industry, with tangential involvement in the automotive, machine production, farm equipment, and textile industries.

The pattern of the interviews was highly structured with controlled questions for the first hour of the interview as applicable to either an American expatriate or a German. The second half hour or longer were additions to or elaborations on data collected during the first hour.

Frequently the language of the interview was in the native language of the expatriate. The inference the writer makes is that a foreign national is more willing to communicate when the interviewer moves in the same language. But then there are foreign expatriates whose command of English is so impeccable that English too easily becomes the medium of exchange.

### III. CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

In response to the question as to why a German desired an assignment in the United States, the results are identified below.

#### Motivations for Working in the United States

|  | %  |
|--|----|
| To prepare for more responsibility when returning to Germany               | 24 |
| To teach the daughter company specific manufacturing or managerial matters | 21 |
| To broaden one's understanding of business in the United States            | 20 |
| To bring back ideas from the affiliate company to the headquarters company | 12 |
| To learn about the American people; travel                                 | 9  |
| To learn the English language better                                       | 8  |
| Company assignment or request  | 6  |

A quick inference from the above is an absence of seeming cultural blindness. The wish to help and learn abounds; expansion of the expatriate's cultural, business sensitivity appears as a sincere desire. One might infer that ethnocentrism is entirely absent. But, once these motivations were refined, specific problems got in the way of meeting the goals of the foreign national and hindered his ability to do a good job.

Wife-family concerns

Minimal information is given the German expatriate by the mother company other than job description, job responsibility, location of work, or name of supervisor. While a husband received little communication for his overseas assignment, his wife got less. She was too often a mere footnote to learning about what to expect in the United States.

Preparation for the expatriate's wife is almost non-existent. She arrives in the United States and is immediately plunged into demanding communication exchanges, such as the following:

- She most often will know little English, yet must immediately purchase food at an unfamiliar store, using unfamiliar money, in an unfamiliar language, or order at an unfamiliar restaurant.
- She must enroll her children in school, about which she knows little, and put them in a system quite different from that of Germany. Often the school will ask that her children be admitted to a class one grade less than in Germany.
- She is, frequently, greeted by neighbors in English which is spoken rapidly; she hardly comprehends the thrust of the oral message.
- She may be contacted by a real estate agent, for either renting an apartment or buying a house; she does not have the slightest idea about the American process of looking for and then purchasing a house.

In short, the American culture in which she must immediately communicate orally is so momentous during her initial days that often she is bitter, overwhelmed, disillusioned, frightened. Lacking good communication skill and an understanding of the

United States, she is in an island of strangers, unable to communicate well, much less understand the rapidity of events surrounding her.

The inference to be drawn is that a poor communication of differences in cultural variances, between Germany and the United States, will affect the firm management goals set by her husband. Or as one expatriate said to the writer, "My wife came to the United States feeling that things would be just like home. And I found myself solving personal problems before I could begin my job with assurance."

#### Informality

German expatriates who were interviewed are ambivalent about the informality of Americans. The cultural shock of being called Fred rather than Herr Feuerstein was not overcome easily.

This factor of informality is a less serious communication problem: what to call your co-worker in an interpersonal relationship. For example, a group of four persons, one American and three Germans, played tennis once a week. At play the American was called and did call all the others by their first name, with all Germans calling him by his first name and the other German colleagues by their last name.

Those Germans who are deeply bothered by the informality give the following reasons, from their cultural vantage point:

1. It is a mark of respect to address someone by his last name preceded by Mr., Miss, or Mrs. There is rapport through this formal form of address and the work relationship may be as close as it is with Americans who use first names. To draw cultural conclusions other than that is in error.

2. Informal first names are reserved for close intimates, family friends, relatives. Thus to have an unknown American invade the enclave of personalness, bred of years, is a cultural communication shock.
3. Germans feel some Americans play management games, trying psychological tricks to bend expatriates to their point of view, attempting to gain the inner circle of intimacy, and hoping thereby to persuade.

Hence our informal mode of communication which we consider culturally appropriate is a troublesome cultural difference. The German expatriate ascribes motives to the cultural habit of informality; he measures our patterns of address by his own ethnocentric sculpturings, and Americans do no less by their act of criticism.

#### Language

For most Germans the English language presents little difficulty. Their command of sentence structure and syntax moves on the wheels of excellent English training in their schools. They come from a multicultural environment where a command of various languages is desirable. But when coming to the unicultural world of the United States they meet an attitude which Kolde describes so well:

Linguistic capability presents the greatest challenge in international managerial communication. It is no exaggeration to say that the typical American-headquartered multinational firm possesses no foreign language capability whatsoever--all its executive and technical personnel are strictly unilingual. Nothing



can be communicated that is not in English. This subjects all transboundary communications of the firm to the tyranny of ignorance.<sup>1/</sup>

The German expatriate is prompt to suggest that the linguistic unfamiliarity is not wholly his fault, rather more the problem of the American daughter company. Nevertheless, he too faces problems which embroil him in culture and in communication:

- The ubiquitous American written report is arduous and more demanding of him than the exercise of his oral English skills. He must ceaselessly struggle to put his thoughts in writing, consuming time, which he feels, could be better utilized elsewhere.
- Americans have many nuances and double meanings which pervade their language; again these take considerable time to grasp but all the while perfects his understanding of American culture.
- Add to the formal structure and movement of language the entire overlaid and parallel nonverbal communication and a second level of communication intervenes, again with the effect of communicating cultural values and systems of the daughter company.
- He often is a translator, i.e., he is asked to translate received telexes for his supervisor, who is monolingual. In turn he translates the communications sent by his supervisor. The task can be done, but the responsibility for freedom from error and interpretation is his own. He is often uncomfortable.
- He is not at ease communicating in German with other German expatriates. His fluency in his mother tongue

<sup>1/</sup> E. J. Kolde, The Multinational Company, Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1974, p. 147.

is undeniable, but he fears the inference that his American supervisors will draw, that he is trying to shield a thought from being heard by his American friends.

Thus the expatriate finds his multilingual expertness giving him momentum in acquiring cultural sensitivity through language, yet remaining still unsure of the correctness of all his interpretations, especially when he is proficient in both English and German.

#### Distance from headquarters

Distance is at once a managerial and a cultural problem; its effect upon the expatriate varies: first, the obvious psychological distance from home affects family and worker. By moving to the United States foreign nationals absent themselves from the daily informal and formal communication of their peers within the mother company. Being deprived of this daily rapport, some lose contact entirely; others are blatantly bitter about the separation; some long for home. Contracts may be for a four-year stay in the United States, but total exclusion during that time from channels of communication with home can be an eternity when shut off from the camaraderie and decision making of the familiar.

Second, the workers direct communication with the German mother firm is sparse. Whether by prescription or unintentional design, there is peer pressure to communicate primarily with colleagues in the United States. My interview answers often record the following as given by the German expatriate: there is a natural competitiveness between daughter and mother company in most areas of production and design, hence any hint of sending possible useful information overseas is fervently resisted. Some American supervisors

insist on seeing every formal communication with the mother company, in English, before sending the message. One must be naive not to suppose the existence of an informal channel, but such a network was difficult to determine.

Third, the openness of the American system of business affects the expatriate. Of the more than 100 Germans interviewed, not one indicated a desire to "steal" ideas from the United States. On the other hand, they were hesitant to give the daughter company information which they knew. Their attitude was that in such an open society as the United States material which was closely held in Germany could make it into the American market and provide a competitive advantage against the mother firm. They were therefore uniformly close mouthed, because of a traditional penchant for secrecy, perhaps overly so in an open system of communication when public disclosure could hurt the overall goals of the company.

### Mobility

Germans in their native country live close to their work. Travel distance to their job in the last 20 years may have lengthened somewhat, yet the majority move on bicycles, streetcars, buses, trains. It was unusual to speak with expatriates who commuted over one to two miles to work.

Now transplant that same German worker to the United States: his cultural roots have temporarily been severed; he is usually assigned to a company in or near a large metropolitan area; he hears rumors affecting his safety that even the hardiest find difficult to overlook. Additionally, he perceives a colleagual arrogance in the statement "that we had to solve our problems when we came over so you can do the same yourself."

Burdened with these conflicting pressures he is consequently faced with locating a place usually far distant from the company. His conservative mobility rebels, all his cultural vibrations resist living ten, even twenty miles from work. And he is ill at ease. The dilemma is clear: he wishes a home away from the usual pressures of work, yet does not wish to commute on a public transportation system, which by his standards really does not exist. I discovered no expatriate who did not compromise his concept of mobility: they all now commute, even one expatriate who lives in Manhattan and drives over one hour to work. The German expatriates have proven most resilient.

A second interpretation of mobility is job mobility. It remains to be seen whether the younger generation of German managers will follow the paths of their elders: being wed to a company for life. My interviews suggest that the cultural adhesion of company loyalty is still firm, much stronger than that of their American counterparts.

Germans sense Americans as mobile and lukewarm in company allegiance. To support this generalization, they point to the high turnover of workers who leave positions readily, easily erasing their loyalty for the temptation of an increase in salary or promotion, even at a competitor's company. Thus Germans are hesitant to communicate with American colleagues whose veneer of loyalty may be thin. Several Germans expressed the following thought: "Why should we discuss advances made in our mother company; why should I bring along the steps in the chemical process, when the workers with whom I deal may be working for a competitor tomorrow? In Germany when a man leaves he must refrain

from giving information to the competitor. I don't see that in the United States."

Thus mobility, either in living distance, as a non-verbal communicator, or in the seemingly rapid turnover of American management, troubles some expatriates and affects their view of work here in the United States.

#### IV. DIFFERENCES IN ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS FOR EXPATRIATES

Elsewhere are discussed specific problems within written reports emanating from German daughter companies.<sup>2/</sup> Our purpose here is to examine differences--some of which lead to problems--in oral and written procedures confronting an expatriate in an American subsidiary. We must impose the usual warning: generalizations are like amoebas, both bend according to the pressures of an external exception but overall retain a certain consistency of form. Not all the conclusions of the expatriate are negative; some statements are delightfully affirmative. We will note four major concerns.

##### Open channels

The hypothesis that American-managed affiliates of German parent companies have open channels of communication is securely founded. If there is one viable statement it is that oral interpersonal business contacts between German expatriates and supervisors is effortlessly made. The following quotations from expatriates are typical:

--A major procedure I shall miss when returning to Germany is the ease with which I spoke with my superior in the United States.

<sup>2/</sup> H.W. Hildebrandt, "Technical Written Reports from Germany," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, Vol. 4 (4), Fall 1974, pp. 291-303.

- In the United States one can walk directly into the office of his superior, even the office of the personnel director, and have an issue discussed. The problem may not be solved instantly, but the contact is significant.
- I'm not always sure my boss was listening to what I said regarding the German point of view, but the fact that he took the time, almost at any time, was revealing to me.
- The one person I have not spoken to is the President of the company. An American colleague suggested I write him a note. I did, and received a brief response.

Anecdotal as these statements may sound, they re-occur with predictable frequency in the interviews with the expatriates. Their responses do not disparage the German mother company, but Germans felt the immediacy of an oral response was easier to obtain in the United States.

The above positive pattern was clearly revealed in our study. On the negative side was the criticism that written channels of communication were more clogged here, that an excessive amount of time elapsed between sending a report and receiving a reply. Or, no reply was received in response to a well-worked out report, leading directly to a second observation.

#### Written reports

Almost a unanimous decision is given the concept that American business demands too many written reports. Note that the preceding sentence says nothing about form or content, only frequency. A closer analysis gives the following expatriate

conclusions:

1. The delegation of authority is so liberal in American daughter firms that demarcations between functional responsibilities are clouded. Overlapping occurs. An ultimate decision, the Germans felt, demanded a written record of who requested the decision and who finally approved it.
2. A second factor, say some expatriates, is that the very glibness, the informality of Americans demands that major formal decisions be in writing. Here informality gives way to the structured written statement.
3. Americans work harder. This category of response may surprise even American managers, but the executive parking lot of a German firm is virtually deserted on Saturdays. Not so the American. Read time, on weekends, was a frequent category which Germans attributed to their American colleagues, time to read reports and probably, say some, send out requests for more information.
4. When Germans write a report they do so with unbelievable thoroughness. The methodical, overly long statements search for finality. German expatriates indicate that they find the American monthly and quarterly reports to be a collection of figures, devoid of much prose, and are mainly procedures for collecting numbers but not administrative substance.

The above four conclusions are German generated. They imply more clearly defined reasons for reports in the mother company than in the United States. Formal statements when required become the written record for an American action, almost to protect the innocent should an ultimate decision go awry.

Oral discussions

The oral discussion as viewed by the German expatriate offers a mixture of linguistic and procedural differences. Americans are led to believe that they sit at the pinnacle of group process, giving birth and breath to group dynamics. To the expatriate's way of thinking the results are less than positive, whether caused by Americans or not. Take linguistic problems. A senior German manager, perhaps a member of the Vorstand (Executive Committee) may come to the United States with a little knowledge of English, less than his German colleagues. He understands, but speaks little. In a meeting with him, in the United States, are both German and American colleagues. The language is English. Discussion proceeds well between the truly multilingual participants but dies when moving through an interpreter for the Vorstand member. What passes for discussion with him is really nothing but a series of questions and answers: ask in German, translate question into English, discuss in English to find the response, then retranslate into German. Time passes: too much, and the discussion dies.

Both sides of the room are affected. But the Germans still come out winners because all save one are multilingual. Americans are totally lost during the exchanges in German. There is less and less discussion, with the Germans unhappy that their American hosts cannot comprehend and are embarrassed that a senior member of their group is monolingual, the very criticism they level at their American co-workers.

Our survey revealed that procedure in American discussions received inordinate criticism. Germans are, by cultural heritage well organized and well prepared, especially so if they are members



of the scientific cadre such as chemists or physicists. Out of their disciplines they are taught to question, to pursue effects from valid causes, regardless of the time involvement or the source of the proposal which lies on the table.

An alleged absence of tight questioning in the United States disturbs all Germans in our study. The Americans, misreading the intent, draw different conclusions. And both sides have stumbled due to their cultural myopia.

#### Decision-making and communication

Allied to the preceding point is the feeling of alienation, of being left out of the decision-making process. The German expatriates give three consistent examples: (1) they attended numerous staff meetings more as observers than as active participants, feeling that the form of their contributions were mainly that of asking questions; (2) they felt their reports were submitted in good faith, yet they received little or no feedback, positive or negative, and (3) they perceived an attitude of condescension from some American colleagues.

It can be said that there is a cultural polarity in making decisions. Germans say that Americans move with haste, are willing to make decisions based on fifty to sixty percent of the evidence, not afraid to take risks on insufficient facts. American expatriates in Germany view the Germans as inordinately slow in making decisions. German reports are models of prolixity, which lay out options that, say the Americans, have not the slightest chance of being considered. Yet time and space is devoted to discussion, in great detail, of effects up to the year 2000 or thereabouts. Such polarity of views cannot but help affect attitudes in the decision process, the group discussion, or interpersonal communication. A German said, "Americans feel that we're attacking them as

persons when we but simply question an idea; we're taught in science to analyze in great detail." An American said, "We can't get through a meeting with the Germans; they're so picky that a lot of time is wasted." Thus it is not a question of whom to blame, but rather of pointing out that differences in training mask deeply felt ideas as to how to proceed.

#### V. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No multinational company will ever abolish all its communication problems. By definition the concepts inherent in multinationality bring with it global perspectives which defy tidy and simplistic solutions. There are hindrances enough to communicating in one culture, more in two. Amplify the communication concept to encompass the global values of nations and individuals and any student of communication can quickly spawn further hindrances which our interviews did not discover.

1. An overriding conclusion is that sufficient information about the cultural variances between German and American cultures is not given to a foreign expatriate. He is usually technically competent, selected on that basis, but only marginally aware of what he, his wife, or his family can expect. The obvious recommendation of providing both him and his wife with more cultural insight cannot be denied.
2. Scarcity of information is not wholly restricted to the foreign expatriate: his American co-workers are also unaware of the cultural communication differences of their foreign colleague. Americans, too, operate from an ethnocentric attitude, drawing inferences which are factually inaccurate and damage day-to-day communication, decreasing the effectiveness of the entire relationship. Affiliates, and their workers need cultural information as well.

3. Language incompetence is more an American problem. Our linguistic arrogance that the world should speak English may work when the mother company is American, but language training for an American daughter company of a German subsidiary is a sensible way to begin to correct this deficiency.
4. The oral and written differences between members of the same firm but of two different cultures need a statement. It is not a matter of right or wrong, rather of comprehending the cultural heritage from which the differences spring. The polarity of views may never change, but understanding that they do exist is a step toward better multinational communication.

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