



COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT TOOLS FOR MANAGING PROJECTS IN AN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Insufficient communication and the lack of stakeholder integration are among the most common drivers for unattended change causes and uncontrolled change impacts in a project (Zhao *et al.*, 2010) (Ochieng and Price, 2010). Especially in case of international projects, where different cultures are present and teams are often only virtually connected, projects teams face even more communication problems that can affect the outcome of a project. Intercultural differences influence the way each team member gets engaged into interaction with other stakeholders of the project.

In the main project management standards, there are tools and methods for managing communication and stakeholders, but their application has to be analyzed from an intercultural perspective. Besides a project communication plan, we address such tools as the mission breakdown structure (MBS) in order to give this perspective (Andersen, 2014). It is suggested that the MBS can be used as one of the tools enhancing the engagement of stakeholders (SH) (Andersen *et al.*, 2009) and increasing communication effectiveness through a shared vision (Lee *et al.*, 2015). In this article, we categorize and describe the main communication issues and tools for managing international projects within an intercultural environment.

Key words: *Intercultural differences, international projects, communication management, stakeholders*
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Introduction

“Communication has been identified as one of the single biggest reasons for project success or failure” (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 515). Good communication, which is needed for project success, is structured in a way that helps to minimize or even avoid unexpected delays and misunderstandings, prevent duplication of efforts, discover issues, implement preventive measures and deal with all mentioned above in an effective way. In addition, stakeholder management is a crucial point in managing international projects as stakeholders are “individuals, groups or organizations who affect or can be affected by, or interested in the execution or the result of the project” (ICB 4, 2015, p. 145). That is why, in this article, various approaches (in standards of project management, such as ICB 4, PMBOK 5, Prince2, etc.) on communication and stakeholder management are analyzed from the intercultural point of view.

In order to analyze existing issues and tools, the literature review was conducted using key words such as communication, international, intercultural, skills, competencies, and stakeholders. The following databases were used: Science Direct, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The goal was to explore and analyze issues and tools applied for managing communication in international and intercultural projects. The authors assumed that issues are



also discussed in the literature as challenges, threats, barriers, and sometimes as risks. Although it may seem to be quite a big area of research, this approach allowed the discovery of different facets of issues in managing communication. High attention was specifically paid to studies devoted to intercultural skills and stakeholder management in international projects as these aspects help to shed light on the so-called ‘human’ side of communication issues.

As international communication (= people speaking in a language other than their native) occurs in an intercultural environment, it is more challenging to communicate effectively and it causes a higher rate of misunderstandings. Hence, more efforts are required to ensure common goals and values among project stakeholders. One of the main tools in managing the project stakeholders is the stakeholder analysis (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 292). In the initiation phase in any international project, the stakeholder analysis is of outstanding importance and high complexity as stakeholders often are not well-known and sometimes difficult to be identified and analyzed. When it comes to stakeholders in an intercultural project, Lückmann and Färber advise that due to complexity reasons, it is reasonable to initially focus on those stakeholders that define the requirements of the project (Lückmann and Färber, 2016, p. 86).

However, the literature review has not revealed very much information and studies particularly on stakeholder communication issues in international projects. That is why, additionally, the authors explored how a mission breakdown structure can be applied for stakeholder engagement and communication using an example of the case study done by Andersen (Andersen, 2014).

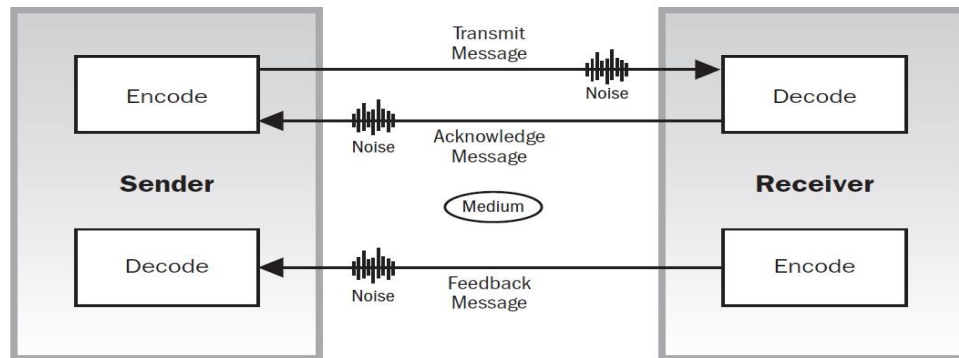
Research results and discussion

Intercultural aspect of communication and communication plan in project management standards

The term ‘communication’ comes from Latin *commūnicāre*, meaning "to share" (Etymonline). The initial purpose of communication in a cross-cultural environment is to seek common ground, to exchange ideas and information, gain customers, and sometimes establish partnerships between several parties (Rothlauf J., 2015, p. 145). Zakaria suggests that “intercultural communication is defined as interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds with distinct communication patterns, preferences, and styles” (Zakaria, 2016, p. 3).

In the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK®), a basic communication model (figure 1) is presented containing elements such as the sender, the receiver, the medium and noise. It is mentioned that the medium is the technology medium, including the mode of communication, while noise means any interference or barriers that might compromise the delivery of the message. (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 292).

The elements of this basic communication model introduce places where potential issues can take place and consequently where methods and tools should be applied. Senders and receivers face mostly issues of linguistic, cultural, and psychological character, while media cause mainly issues in the respect of which and how technology is used.



Source: PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 293

Figure 1: **Basic communication model**

In the IPMA “Individual Competence Baseline” version 4 (ICB 4), it is suggested that a communication plan is used as a method to plan the stakeholder strategy. According to ICB 4, the communication plan “describes for each stakeholder (group) the why, what, when, how often, how (through which communication channel), who (should communicate), and the level of detail of the communication” (ICB 4, 2015, p. 147). ICB 4 outlines the importance of culture and language for a modern project manager, stating that “in a multi-cultural project, an individual may need to navigate multiple cultural and value norms (ICB 4, 2015, p. 58)”. Furthermore, the ICB 4 competence element “Culture and values” contains despite of being related mostly to the organizational culture and values, some points on the multi-cultural environment. For example, one of the knowledge elements is “theories about culture” and the skill elements include the following items (ICB 4, 2015, p. 59):

- Cultural awareness
- Respect for other cultures and values
- Aligning to and working with different cultural environments
- Bridging different cultures and values to achieve the project, program and portfolio objectives

PMBOK® defines the communication management as part of the project management plan. It consists of several elements that standardize the flow of communication, such as a reason for the distribution of information, the responsible person, people who receive the information, and technologies that are used (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 296). However, the communication management according to PMBOK® does not pay any close attention to cultural differences in particular. Only a few sentences in the appendix are dedicated to cultural awareness in communication although communication is mentioned as one of the biggest factors to affect project success according to PMBOK® (see the introduction of this article).

PRINCE2® guidance presents the communication management strategy as an approach for managing communication in projects (PRINCE2, 2009). In PRINCE2® it is clearly stated that a description of means and frequency of communication has to be developed for both, external and internal parties of the project. Stakeholder engagement is considered as part of the communication management strategy (PRINCE2, 2009, p. 42). In PRINCE2®, the so-called



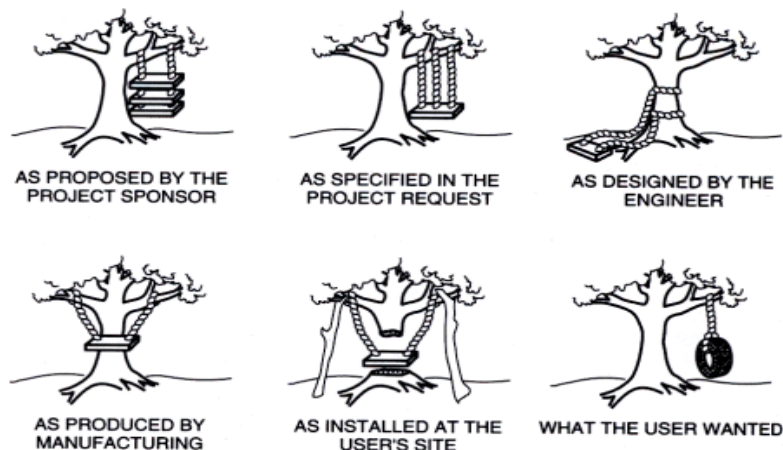
composition of the communication management strategy does not specify any international or intercultural features. Nevertheless, in the composition, these specific features can be embedded in sub-areas such as ‘tools and techniques’, ‘reporting’, ‘timing of communication activities’, ‘stakeholder analysis’. The sub-area ‘information needs for each interested party’ consists of the following elements (PRINCE2, 2009, p. 239):

- Information required to be provided from the project
- Information required to be provided to the project
- Information provider and recipient
- Frequency of communication
- Means of communication
- Format of the communication

Overall, it can be summarized that the communication plan is a key tool in managing communication. It can contain different information fields but mainly includes the following elements: the type of communication, its content and objectives, participants, schedule and location. However, the standards mentioned above contain instructions how to manage communication, still just a few or only general hints on how to deal with communication issues in the intercultural environment are included.

The mission breakdown structure for addressing values and issues in international projects

The most expansive description of communications in projects with some references to culture was found in Kerzner’s “Project Management: A systems approach to planning, scheduling, and controlling” (Kerzner, 2013). Kerzner clearly addresses a breakdown of communications using a figure where different visions of the project stakeholders are illustrated (figure 2). Thus, it can be assumed that communication issues are directly connected with different types of stakeholders and their visions.



Source: Kerzner, 2013, p. 265

Figure 2: A breakdown of communications

In ICB 4, it is clearly stated that it is necessary to align the project goals with the project mission and vision (ICB 4, 2015, p. 41). In addition, culture and value alignment is crucial for a



project that extends across different societies, organizations or groups (ICB 4, 2015, p. 58). It means that differences in the stakeholders' needs and expectations should be taken into account.

In the study conducted by Andersen, the mission breakdown structure (MBS) was used to ensure an effective interplay between the project and all involved stakeholders (Andersen, 2014, p. 885). The illustrative case used by Andersen contained the development of the MBS for the project conducted by a consultancy firm for a client. The client was a wholesaler of international products, who was acting through local retailers and decided to set up its own web-shop. In the initiating phase of the project, the MBS was developed with the involvement of the project owner, the top management of the client, and future users. (Andersen, 2014, p. 888). In the figure 3, adopted from Andersen, the authors suggest that the MBS is helpful for the categorization of stakeholder groups and the development of communication based on mission itemization. Each mission itemization (for example, "Client has satisfied retailers") is connected with the respective stakeholders. Hence, specific communication tools can be developed based on the mission framed according to the known cultural aspects and communication issues.



Source: Adopted from Andersen, 2014

Figure 3: The mission breakdown structure for managing communication with stakeholders

For example, while engaging local retailers, the project manager promotes the itemization of the mission, called "Client has satisfied retailers", taking the cultural differences of local retailers into account and involving the client itself. This approach can also be used in order to store lessons learned in relation to the type of stakeholder group, communication issues, and cultural differences.

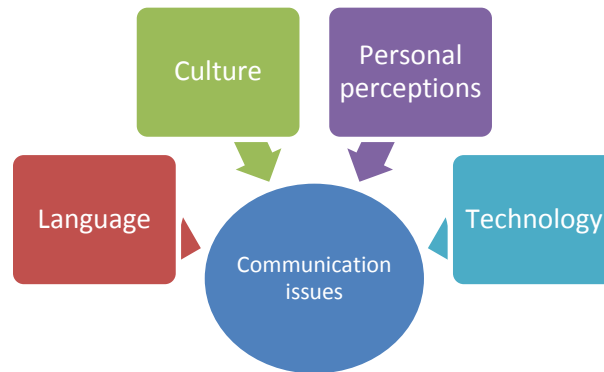
Communication issues and tools

The awareness of potential issues and tools will allow a more effective management of communication which has to be performed as early as possible (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 290). In this part the results of the literature review on communication issues and tools are presented.

Many authors discuss issues in communication in respect with its modes such as verbal, para-verbal, and non-verbal (Gudykunst and Mody, 2002) (Mruk-Badiane, 2007) (Rothlauf J.,



2015). Nevertheless, the authors have defined four categories of issues in terms of communication in international projects (figure 4). This categorization allowed to group corresponding tools found in the literature.



Source: Authors' representation

Figure 4: **Intercultural Communication Issues**

Taking the scope of the paper into account, only linguistic, cultural and personal issues are presented in details. However, the sub-part with the technology issues is included as well to foster the discussion and further studies.

Language

It is generally agreed that the most issues in intercultural communication arise due to language (Rothlauf J., 2015). Tools and methods used to deal with linguistic misunderstandings are directly connected with the different modes of communication: verbal, para-verbal, non-verbal.

It is important to remember that in case of non-native speakers, foreign language skills vary. Only due to the weak speaking skills, people might prefer another mode of communication (Shachaf, 2008, p.136). Thus, spoken verbal communication, although face-to-face meetings are considered as the best tool for communication (Daim *et al.*, 2012, p. 205), may need to be supported by written verbal communication.

As language and culture are interconnected, insufficient language skills of the team members might not be evident in the beginning of a project. A mentality of some nationalities, especially in case of English, assumes that the trial-and-error method works best at work. In other words, people prefer to hide insufficient language skills. Also, it is important to know a value of language certificates in a specific country.

Planning language skills required for a project, one should also distinguish between colloquial and professional speeches. If the colloquial speech is essential for a project role, unless a full-time interpreter is provided, the respective language skills have to be proved.

The issues that appear due to the language issues and the respective tools are presented in table 1.

Table 2

Issues and tools connected to the language

Issues	Tools	Sources
Spoken verbal communication:	✓ Explain things in simple words	(Rothlauf J., 2015)
• Difficult accent	✓ Use an interpreter who is an expert in the field	(Kerzner,
	✓ Using redundancy (i.e., saying in two different	



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult pronunciation • Insufficient skills in language • Poor choice of vocabulary 	<p>ways) whenever possible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Using visual aids, when presenting <p>Listening skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Stay focused on the speaker’s main point ✓ Tune out all potential distractions ✓ Offer the fullest possible attention ✓ Give signals that you are listening as objectively as possible ✓ Be flexible and open-minded when new topics or ideas are raised ✓ Ask for clarification if anything is unclear ✓ Validate the speaker’s main points 	<p>2013)</p> <p>(Arent, 2009)</p>
<p>Written verbal communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the message communicated • Insufficient skills in language (poor choice of vocabulary, grammar mistakes, typos) • Not self-explaining abbreviations and slang words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Avoid ambiguity ✓ Check the spelling ✓ Keep your message short to make sure it will soon be read and easily understood ✓ Pay attention to the “subject” and the first sentence of your message ✓ The attention of the receiver must be raised and he/she should be able to quickly grasp your intention ✓ Try to avoid negative verbalizations ✓ Keep in contact with business partners, (congratulatory notes, thank you emails etc.) ✓ Always double-check your message before sending it off 	<p>(Rothlauf J., 2015) (PMBOK 5, 2013) (Kerzner, 2013)</p>
<p>Interpretation and translation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminology • Metaphors • Accent • Unclear pronunciation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Create and maintain project terminology ✓ Get familiar with metaphors and other connotative meanings to avoid confusion and anxiety ✓ Invite an interpreter or translator with expertise in the corresponding field ✓ Ensure that an interpreter gets familiar with particularly difficult counterparts (incl. using audio or video recordings) 	<p>(Own source) (Rothlauf J., 2015)</p>

Culture

Cultural differences often causes misunderstandings in communication. The main issue is that messages are composed or ‘coded’ in one cultural context, sent, and then received or ‘decoded’ in another cultural context. (Rothlauf J., 2015, p. 2). In some studies, it is argued that the cultural dimensions were reflected in the following beliefs and behaviors: trust and fears, lack of participation and commitment, and insufficient information sharing (Lückmann and Färber, 2016, p. 89).

There are two main points that are essential to improve and progress while working in an intercultural environment, namely, intercultural awareness and intercultural resilience.



Intercultural awareness includes the abilities to respect others, being able to shift temporarily into another perspective, building long-lasting cross-cultural personal bonds (Leeds-Hurwitz, W., Stenou, K., 2013, p. 24)

Intercultural resilience refers to the ability to confront and adapt to new situations within a different culture than your own (Simonsen, 2008, p. 36)

These skills and others mainly can be developed through practical experience abroad, which helps to understand cultural aspects and working in an international environment. Thus, for an international company, it is important to send its employees to other countries giving them the opportunity to understand not only differences, but also the strengths and opportunities of each cultural group. Regarding projects itself, when a project starts, a one-week face-to-face meeting is a great tool to facilitate social interaction and create mutual understanding relationships among team members. During such meetings, the project team members get informed about roles and responsibilities, assignments, the communication plan, media used and ground rules of the project. Different issues and tools in this area are summarized in the table 2.

Table 3

Issues and tools connected to the culture

Issues	Tools	Sources
Cultural misunderstandings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes-saying pattern • Tendency to please • Saving-face principle • Different cultural perception • Ideological differences • Religious beliefs and rules • Missing or excluding informal communication due to cultural habits • Space behavior (abusing close or distant patterns) • Touch behavior • Eye behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do not judge the behavior of others on the basis of one's own culture ✓ Nullify own beliefs ✓ Ability to read behind the lines and signs based on own experience and knowledge about the particular (sub-) culture ✓ Ability to anticipate misreading and miscommunication ✓ Intercultural resilience ✓ Initial face-to-face meeting: ✓ Issues embedded in communication plan ✓ Ground rules (can be translated and adjusted to a culture) ✓ Social activities/events ✓ Informal collaboration platforms 	(Rothlauf J., 2015) (Gudykunst and Mody, 2002) (Kerzner, 2013) (Gray and Larson, 2014) (Stawnicza, 2015)
Incompatible style of communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct vs. indirect • (in)tolerance to direct confrontation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Subtle speaking ✓ Explain things in simple words ✓ Avoid offending others ✓ Consult with others before responding ✓ Get familiar with characteristics inherent in the cultural environment ✓ Be aware of strong beliefs and superstitions ✓ Be careful with laughs, intonation, voice volume, mimic and gestures expressed 	(Rothlauf J., 2015)

Personal perceptions

“By understanding and capitalizing on cultural differences, the project management team is more likely to create an environment of mutual trust and a win-win atmosphere”. (PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 515). Thus, intercultural and personal aspects in communication are interrelated.



According to Kerzner, noise in communication (figure 1) results from our own perception screens, which dictate the way we present or perceive the message and from personal interpretations, attitudes, biases and prejudices that lead to ineffective communication (Kerzner, 2013, p. 269). Personal perceptions is a category that includes issues connected with peoples' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and psychology. For example, relationship-focused people are less comfortable to discuss important issues in writing or by phone, which is called avoidance of a specific type of communication due to personal preferences (Gesteland, 1999).

Human and behavioral competencies, or so-called 'soft skills', allow innovating in circumstances where people already have solutions for their problems. Soft skills are, according to the literature review, the most important ones for international project managers (the other categories of a project manager's skills are: organizational, technical and project management skills). The soft skills are most relevant for managing people in an intercultural environment according to ICB (ICB 4, 2015) and studies of Brière *et al.*, 2013, Abbot *et al.* 2005, Pheng and Leong, 1999. In table 3, the issues and tools connected to the personal perceptions are summarized.

Table 4

Issues and tools connected to the personal perceptions

Issues	Tools	Sources
Affecting the decoding process, when message received is different from the message sent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluative tendency • preconceived ideas • attitudes, emotions, and self-interest • position and status • existing relationships with the sender • lack of responsive feedback • selective listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Kick-off meeting followed by creation of chats in social platforms or networks ✓ Make sure that the receiver's reaction to the message corresponds to the sender's purpose ✓ Obtain feedback, possibly in more than one form 	(Kerzner, 2013, p. 268) (Rothlauf J., 2015)
Inappropriate para-verbal communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the voice • the speech melody • the speaking tempo • the pitch of your voice • the emphasis of different words in a sentence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Try to get feedback ✓ Questionnaires to reveal these issues ✓ Make sure that the receiver's reaction to the message corresponds to the sender's purpose 	(Mruk-Badiane, 2007)
Written verbal communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • absence of emotions may make a letter sound too dry, impolite, or demanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use polite expression as much as possible ✓ Follow up on important tasks via skype or any other mean of virtual communication 	
Mistrust based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • competency gap – different qualification of employees from different countries or companies 	Soft skills such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cross-cultural sensitivity ✓ Problem solving ✓ Adaptability and flexibility 	(ICB 4, 2015) (Arent, 2009) (Daim <i>et al.</i> , 2012)



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different salaries/contracts for the activities • hidden expectations of stakeholders • racism and prejudice • negative previous experiences with counterparts or others from same culture • absence of face-to-face communication • missing informal communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Seek commitment of a wide range of stakeholders ✓ Empowerment of local population ✓ Sustainable development ✓ Dynamic leadership ✓ Respectfulness and patience ✓ Cultural open-mindedness ✓ Managing virtual teams and projects ✓ Active listening 	
Avoidance of a specific type of communication due to personal preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maintain and update communication plan ✓ Questionnaires to reveal these issues ✓ Motivation techniques ✓ Personal approach 	(Gudykunst and Mody, 2002)

Technology

Issues connected to technology are related to how and which technology is used. How technology is used depends on how project communications are planned and if project participants have got or obtained the relevant skills to use the technology. Thus, it is essential to create ground rules and specific instructions that are well structured and well-known by all project participants.

Technology issues related to its type (which technology is used) are also called physical barriers. According to Carvalho's summary on communication issues in project management, they include: the speed necessary to distribute information, the type of technology available and the levels of security (passwords, privacy clauses, etc.), project duration, size and other project characteristics that have to correlate with the dimensions of the project (Carvalho, 2008, p. 1280)

The examples of studied issues and tools are shown in table 4, still further studies have to reveal more connections between culture and technology issues.

Table 5

Issues and tools connected with the technology

Issues	Tools	Sources
Issues due to the misuse: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • differences in communication protocols • inaccuracy in project documents updates • delay in message delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “The methods of storage, retrieval, and ultimate disposition of the project information need to be considered, appropriately documented and controlled”. 	(PMBOK 5, 2013, p. 290)
Insufficient communication to the stakeholders or communication of information to the wrong audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maintain and update the project communication plan ✓ Maintain and update the stakeholder register ✓ Both tools mentioned above have to be revised when changes in the project plan or issues in communication occur 	(PMBOK 5, 2013)



Conclusions

In projects conducted in an intercultural environment, tools and methods used for managing communication are strongly connected to the stakeholders. As stakeholders, particularly in international projects, are often not well known, it may cause higher risks for a project. During the initiating phase of a project, the stakeholder analysis has to be performed carefully to reveal all stakeholders and develop tools and methods that consider intercultural communication issues.

The mission breakdown structure is a method to engage each group of stakeholders, using a specific itemization of the mission, where each element is tailored according to the stakeholders' visions, needs and expectations. Such a mission itemization does not only engage stakeholders through motivation, but it can also be used to adjust communication methods and tools to the mission and intercultural specifics of the respective stakeholder group.

Soft skills are crucial for project managers in order to manage projects successfully and deal with intercultural issues. Among the most important soft skills defined in the article, it can be said that the following two are of major importance: cultural sensitivity and intercultural resilience.

The article presented the main issues in international projects that occur due to differences in language, culture, personal perceptions, and technology as the most mentioned in the literature and studies. The respective issues and tools summarized by the authors can be extended and additional studies on this matter will benefit the development of international project management.

Further studies have to explore appropriate communication tools in depth to thoroughly address intercultural communication issues. Additionally, it is necessary to prove the usefulness of stakeholder categorization and mission itemization based on linguistic and cultural aspects.

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