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## Lessons Learned from Globalization – A Case from an Offshore Point of View

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### Abstract

*Globalization in a highly interconnected e-world has opened up new venues and opportunities for people and countries alike. Once scarce locally, offshore resources are now easily accessible to organizations, to accomplish and exceed their strategic goals cost effectively. However, it is demanding for both the host, and particularly for the offshore companies in developing countries who provide support and consulting resources for host (or home) organizations, typically situated thousands of miles away. They continue to reinvent themselves and, under the constant scrutiny for providing, among other things, quality support and services. To better understand a transformational effort by a medium-sized offshore company based in Pakistan providing support for an offshore home organization, a case study from a socio-technical perspective was conducted. The feedback of the senior management and survey of people working for the offshore workforce were conducted. From the qualitative analyses of the offshore workforce survey, instead of technology, candid internal and external perspectives emerged. Workforce survey highlighted the need to review the external percepts of globalization in reference to people and culture, while internal perspectives drew attention to local business practices that must be mitigated from the organizational framework by the offshore leadership. Balance of perspectives were maintained for this case. Finally, lessons learned from the offshore case will serve as a good gauge in stirring conversations regarding the crossroads between globalization and cultures.*

**Key words:** Globalization, Offshore, Culture, Team Work, Nepotism, Leadership



Available online  
[www.bmdynamics.com](http://www.bmdynamics.com)  
ISSN: 2047-7031

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization, accessibility and the growth of the internet has opened up a plethora of new global e-world opportunities, along with challenges (Ismaili, 2015; Ismaili, 2017). In this vein, outsourcing and offshoring strategies are leveraged by host countries in the western hemisphere. In particular, Information Technology (IT) services from developing countries or emerging economics are availed by western organizations to stay competitive and to go global (Alon, Herbert & Munoz, 2007; Webb, 2017). Although both the host and Offshore companies have to mitigate and compromise, however, there seems to be an asymmetry of power and expectations (Arora et al. 2005). The role and leadership interactions become more complicated with the increased globalization, technology development and host expectations. Western hosts dictate, while offshore leaders in the developing countries strive to quickly adapt, reinvent and transform their organizations as a necessary condition to continue serving the host and stay afloat (Brustein, 2013; Chung et al, 2004; Gul, 2003; Punnett, 2004).

The case presented in this study elucidates the lessons learned as organizational leaders of a mid-sized, non-publically trading company, based in Pakistan were required to go through a transformational exercise by the host based in the western hemisphere. Although, the western host is benefitting from offshore resources in several different countries of emerging economics, this article's scope is limited to lessons learned from the workforce qualitative feedback received for the survey, based in Pakistan. This study, in particular, contributes to the overall qualitative understanding of globalization for both the western host and the offshore company, from the perspective of the offshore workforce. Both offshore

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and host leaderships were unexpectedly surprised by the direct and candid feedback received from the offshore workforce survey.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The rhetoric and notions proposed for the globalization in universal terms merits further reflections. The increasingly global and interdependent economic and resource unions across the developed and developing countries offer significant benefits. Among others, it offers competitive advantages, improved profit for organizations and tax advantages (Neelankavil & Zhang, 1996). This 'going global' is viewed by economists as reducing the artificial barriers, in establishing efficient relationships and market integration with international partners, where all nations are equally benefitted (Gul, 2003; Friedman, 2000). According to Neelankavil & Zhang (1996) such integrations will induce positive effects in consumption and production, and in realizing economies to scale. True, such benefits are realized due to cheaper raw materials, expertise, capital and inexpensive offshore workforce (Porter 2008; Neelankavil & Zhang, 1996). It is evident that in a post-industrialized, knowledge-based society there is a premium for acquiring technical resources, including IT and software engineering. In order to stay competitive, host organizations seek out and utilize offshore technical skills sufficiently available in the developing economies (Gannon et al., 2014; Kuruvilla, 2007; Brustein, 2013; Collins 2015), while exploring electronic ways to efficiently impart and transfer knowledge, organizational policies and procedures (Ismaili, 2015; Ismaili, 2017). Thus, globalization provides an impetus for developing economies to train and develop their workforce in technical skills, due to its heavy reliance on such skills (Kuruvilla, 2007; Tikly et al, 2003). Moreover, on one hand, globalization hastens the organization's transformation in streamlining the processes and in the investment of advance IT for global partnership (Drucker, 1999; Eddy 2014). While on the other hand, organizations learn to become nimble in adapting to the complex internal and external dynamics (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996).

Theoretically, percepts of globalization, albeit well intended, are not without costs. This neo-spin to western capitalism seems to fall short of not only political and cultural impacts, but also economical (Zuberi, 2005; Gul, 2003). According to Yusuf (2001), instead of reducing inequalities and leveling the grounds, it is intensifying the economic gaps and lack of considerations for environment, cultures or political frameworks. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, while developing countries are at risk for creating destructive and polarized inequities between its laity, further widening the already existing social strata (Birdsell, 1999; Tikly et al, 2003). Moreover, the balance of power and equilibrium is challenged, where western ideologies and multinationals are empowered to infiltrate and flex their will on the governments and the people of the developing world (Josephson, 2018; Collins, 2015; Gul 2003; Tikly et al, 2003). In their continuous effort to realize higher profit margins, multinationals may not be fully motivated in proactively having best interests of their offshore partners and countries in mind (Watkins, 2002; Gul, 2003).

Host organizations, alternatively, in their quest to compete and going global may form strategic alliances, such as, mergers and acquisition, however they are risky. On one hand, mismatch of leadership vision, processes, procedures and standards may become a source of mutual contention (Bryan, 2003; Hartman et al, 2003), while on the other hand, acquisition may lead to weaker organization culture, due to retrenchment and rightsizing. This may lead to low employee morale, excessive absenteeism, eventually leading to lack of trust and poor top-down relationships (Chan & Pollard 2003; Krishna et al 2004). Apart from job insecurity and reduction of investment in technology infrastructure at home countries (Ellis, 2004; Harrison 2004), organizations, particularly seeking advantage of offshoring or outsourcing, lose control over their resources, home expertise and the product quality (Edwin & Ohaegbu, 2015; Webb,

2017; Mitchell, 2015). Interestingly, in his comparative analyses of airline, transport and engineering companies of Germany and the United Kingdom, Mitchell (2015) found that German organizations are less likely to outsource or offshore compared with the United Kingdom, as they prefer to retain control over the quality of their products and services.

Gul (2003) describes globalization as a 'two-edged sword'. The promised benefits are not equally realized by all countries, as developing nations find themselves vulnerable and at the short end of the stick. Along with marginalizing the powerless government and people, the negative impacts of globalization are strongly felt by the small-to-medium sized companies in the developing economies (Arora et al. 2005; Birdsall, 1999; Watkins, 2002; Mahmutovic, Talovic & Kurtovic, 2017). In particular, offshore companies face intense global competition in terms of price, quality and standards in order to stay successful (Hafsi, 2002; Zain & Mohannadi, 2009). The adverse effects are experienced proportionally more for the organizations in the developing world. Offshore companies are forced to continually reinvent themselves, in order for guaranteed extension of their work with their western hosts (Pologeorgis 2019; Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996). Groysberg & Gregg (2019) although highlighted the absolute need for leadership to keep reinventing in his somber message to Harvard students by Cisco Systems CEO, John Chambers, however, offshore companies when making an effort to reinvent must consider dynamics such as, political and cultural norms of their nations. It would be a recipe for disaster if the offshore leadership fails to recognize such dynamics. Both social and technical skills are equally required for a successful corporate transformation, and in avoiding guaranteed failure (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996; Logan, 2000; Schwartz, 2004). Moreover, host western countries must come to terms that businesses in Asia are reflective of their cultural, economic and political systems, and therefore, must be understood in that context. For example, concentration of family-owned businesses with patriarch-controlled dynasty flourishing under the weak governmental authorities is common (Huang et al, 2019; Rama, 2011; Gul, 2003). Moreover, in an effort of organization's reinvention, employee perceptions must be aligned and managed to help maintain effective team work and job satisfaction; failure will eventually lead to loss of trust and respect for leadership (Drucker, 1999; Boes & Kampf, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Erwin & Garman, 2010; Gruman & Saks, 2011).

To discern such complex interactions, the case for an offshore company based in subcontinental Asia has been discussed in this article. The situation and the lessons learned from the case study representing the point of view of the offshore workforce based in Pakistan are presented in the next sections of this article.

## **SITUATIONAL CONTEXT**

The author of this article provides complementary consulting and analyses to organizations as a service under a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). For the benefit of students and academia, in return, the organizations provided with said service permit lesson learned from such exercises to be shared with students and scholars in the academic communities without identifying them. This author has developed disguised business cases and contributed to academic literature, such as this journal article, while providing full protection to organizations as agreed. Business cases of the lessons learned are developed to enhance student learning. It is hoped that the application of critical thinking skills for such cases will minimize academic-corporate gaps.

Interesting lessons were learned from the data received from the offshore workforce. The host organization leverages expertise from several offshore companies based in the Asia. The presented lessons are based on the family-based, non-publically traded offshore workforce based in Pakistan. The offshore location is not owned by the host organization, but alliance is based on the 'blend-hybrid' contract. According to Luftman (1996), host may strategically leverage either of the three available

offshore options, ad hoc, selective or full-scale assistance. While, Alon et al (2007) identifies three levels of mutual strategic fit, i.e., at the individual, inter & intra-organizational. In such a case, the scope of offshore contractual agreement between host & offshore will be in-between of Luftman's (1996) selective to full scale choices as well as a blend of both inter-intra organizational levels as proposed by Alon et al (2007). Offshore workforce are full time employees and are paid by the offshore company based in Pakistan. However, their time is fully dedicated to working on the host organization projects, as if acting as full time employees of the host. While work evaluations and promotions are provided by the local leadership at the offshore location, the feedback for the employee assessments are directly provided by the host leadership.

#### METHODOLOGY AND DATA FLOW

In their effort to discern concerns about the quality of work by offshore consultants, the host leadership contacted the leaders regarding their initiative to survey offshore consultants anonymously. An extensive survey was developed that included both qualitative and quantitative questions; the survey was hosted on the intranet by the Liaison.

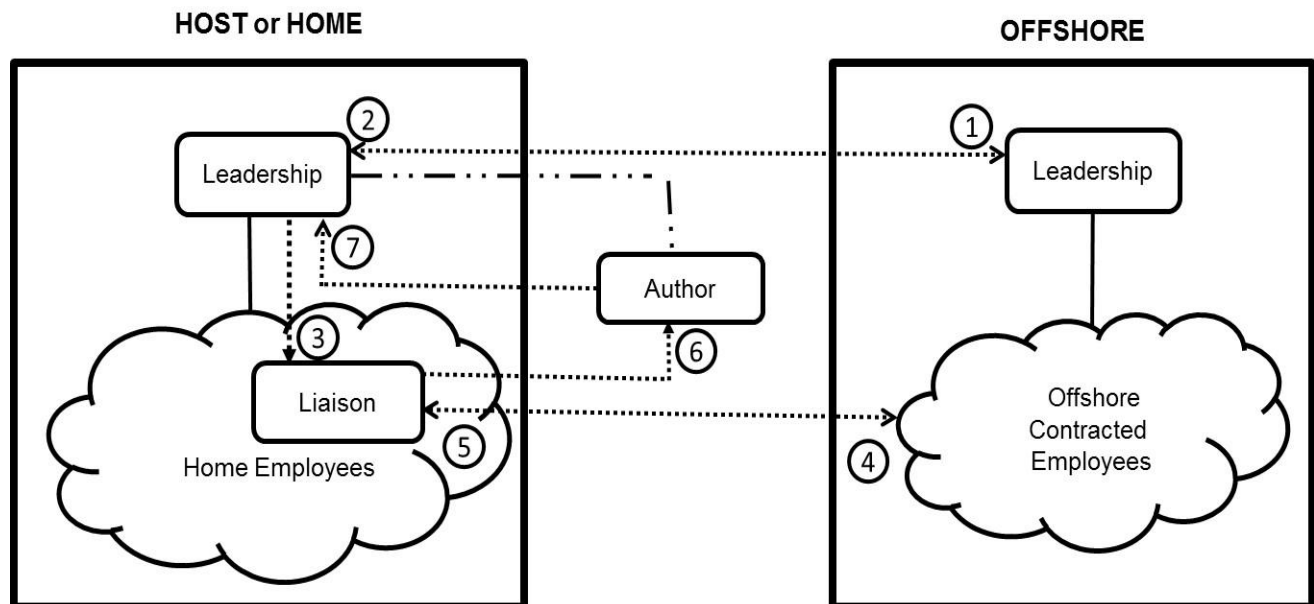


Figure 1. The data collection process.

The Liaison sent emails to the offshore workforce only, excluding the managers and offshore leaders. The offshore workforce was assured that they cannot be identified, and their personal feedback will not be shared verbatim with the leadership; only the summary of their findings will be available to them, once analyzed. The link was sent to the workforce for participation. The survey could be accessed from anywhere, and at any time. Once the link was clicked to complete the survey, a randomly generated number was provided as a User ID to access their online survey, within 24 hours. The offshore employee names were not collected, however their gender and age range were collected, along with their feedback for both quantitative and qualitative open-ended questions, (for e.g., *what messages would you like to convey to your leadership in Pakistan? And, what specific things you want us host to know?*)

This author was not involved in the development of the survey or the collection of survey data. The author was provided with the de-identified data sample for analysis. Only the content analyses of qualitative feedback received from the offshore workforce is covered for this article. Analyzed findings were shared with the leadership. See Figure 1 for the process and data collection flow.

The bidirectional flow 1-2 depicts the initial exchanges regarding survey at the Host-Offshore Leadership level. Flow 4 -5 depicts the host Liaison sending the email/link, guaranteeing anonymity and receipt of online surveys from the offshore workforce. The author maintains a consultant role; analyzed de-identified redacted data received from Liaison and shared the findings with host leadership as depicted in unidirectional flows 6 and 7.

## FINDINGS

The findings discerned from the received survey seems to hold some psychological validity as the response rate is surprisingly high. See Table 1 for details.

**Table 1.***Participant Characteristics*

Collected Information	Count
Total Offshore anticipated	91
Total Offshore responded	79
Survey Response Rate %	86.6
Self-identified Male	64
Self-identified Female	11
No gender Information	4
Identified Age Range	19 - 52

From the survey data in Table 1, it appears that the offshore workforce was eager to participate with an over 86% participation rate. It is not clear, however it is unlikely, whether there was any implied pressure from the local leadership for participation. Moreover, there is asymmetry of gender participation, as the number of participants who were women only counts for around 14%, excluding 4 participants who did not identify their gender. A wide inter-participant age range of 33 years was reported.

From the unusually straightforword qualitative responses of the offshore workforce, two trends stood out that were surprising. Originally, the leadership were expecting the lack of technical skills or development to be the cause. However, that was not the case identified in the offshore workforce survey. The first strong thread was directed at the offshore local leadership, who were not respected due their questionable managerial practices. They were cited for nepotism and favoritism. Most participants expressed such opinions also followed by indication that their team work, quality and job satisfaction are impacted by it. The second trend was directed more towards the host, their expectations, practices and lack of consideration/ignorance of the offshore culture. Survey participants shared perception of how developing economies and cultures are impacted by one-way of western globalization.

The findings were discussed with the host leadership, which in turn, were summarized for the offshore executives. The offshore executives followed up with responses that were specifically directed towards them.



## DISCUSSIONS

The first thread of findings strongly indicate the offshore participants' dissatisfaction with the nepotism and favoritism that local leadership displayed. More specifically, relatives were reported to be hired at all levels, including managerial roles, whether they were qualified for such roles. According to offshore workforce participants, this impacted their team efforts, quality of deliverables and respect for executives. In this vein, some participants wrote (extracts):<sup>2</sup>

How can I respect or follow someone in authority who does not know the abcs of what we are doing. It is easy to for a blind to lead a blind but not the one with the seeing eyes. Ask my manager what is waterfall or difference between waterfall and agile methods.

We have people in technical teams. They do not know anything about technology and do not do any work. They just show up to office to warm their seats and as s [typo 'a'] favor. It is unfair for everyone to do all the work to survive while they do not have to. Job satisfaction must be high for them but what [about] us? You can work and support team to a certain limit then let it go. It is not the overall skills it is the unqualified people in the team making quality slip.

Skills does not matter relationship does... can't rely on any of the hired relatives.. they don't do anything for team, don't care but will be there forever not because of their skills but because of their dads, fathers and brothers. I call them 'significant others'<sup>3</sup>

You don't have to know you can tell who is hired on merits and who is a relative... they are everywhere. There is no concept of merits in pay or promotion. I do not respect our so called leaders who are aware of this and turning a deaf ear. Most of us are technically competent but quality is bound to suffer and [extra 'and'] due to nepotism and favoritism in hiring/promotions. Our quality is as good as the first weak link which are one too many.

In United States, where culture is individualistic, and where the role of democratic institutions and authority of government is strong, behaviors such as nepotism and favortism are not tolerated. In very rare occasions, family members are allowed to work for the same company, on a case-by-case basis, and that also to avoid any impending gender discrimination litigations. However, such dynamics get convoluted when family members find themselves in a supervisor-subordinate relationship at work (HRSimple, 2018). Therefore, strict laws are established at all levels to curb nepotism or favortism, and to ensure work based on qualification. Whereas, the Merit Systems Protection Board protects merit-based hiring processes and reviews individual appeals for violations, the NCSL (National Council of State Legislatures) were chartered to raise awareness of nepotism laws to lawmakers and public officials. Although penalties vary between different states for violating nepotism laws, culprits may be required to pay heavy penalties, including but not limited to, imprisonment and removal from the public office (National Council of State Legislature, 2019). Furthermore, according to Darioly and Riggio (2014) and Walker (2019). Practices such as nepotism and favortism in hiring and promotion creates an unfair and unhealthy work environment. It overburdens the team, due to the insufficient skills of a relative. Consequently, this generates a negative perspective of leadership, who are viewed as unfair. Additionally, the distinct lines between personal and professional relationships get obscured impacting organizational effectiveness. Thus, the organization must have clear policies against such behaviors, as negatives associated with nepotism and favortism outweighs the positives. In their experiments, intrestingly, Darioly and Riggio (2014) showed that even when a well qualified relative is hired, they are

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<sup>2</sup> Responses are reported in American English. For the sake of clarify and when required author insertions or comments are surrounded by square brackets [ ].

<sup>3</sup> It is assumed that the term 'significant others' is used sarcastically by the participant.

rated more negatively by the workforce and assumed to be getting quick promotions and moving up the ladder, if the participants were told that they have familial ties with organization's leader.

There is no denying that the role of effective team work is crucial to quality and organizational success (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Hackman, 1990; Buzaglo & Wheelan, 1999). Unfortunately, leadership tends to forget giving adequate attention in resolving team issues leading them to failures in accomplishing strategy shifts, such as reinventing themselves (Dyer, Dyer & Dyer, 2007; Coghlan, 1994). Lack and imbalance of a team member's competency causes impropotional work stresses on contributing team members, whilst confirming the perception of a poor work environment and an overall lack of job satisfaction as a result (Walker, 2019; Dyer, 1994, Coghlan, 1994). It is evident from the offshore case that, due to nepotism and deficient skill set inherited by relatives, the contributing team members are frequently experiencing role overloads, conflicts and ambiguity. On the other hand, viewing the hired relatives in contempt, as being incompatible and underloaded with work (Adair, 1986).

In contrast with the West or the United States, it must not be forgotten that cultures of Asia are generally collective and the sphere of government authority at the particular offshore location is deemed not wide or strong (for more see, Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, 2019). The offshore company considered for this study is based in sub-continental Asia and it is a family-owned, not publically trading company. Moreover, we must also not forget that businesses do not exist in a vaccum, rather, they are expressions of respective cultures, economic and polictical underpinnings, and the governmental authority. From literature fascinating perspectives are elaborated by scholars such as, Huang et al (2019) and Rama (2011). According to them patriarchy, family-owned private enterprises, and the network of collectively owned family businesses are common. Such a collection of networked businesses wills power and at times undermines the authority. Furthermore, the dynasty of successions and power residing within the family for such businesses, including the one under study, is not unusual. Although patriarchy demands absolute and unfettered power for the family's leader (Weber, 1968), but it does serve other purposes. In a collective society with an underperforming economy and corrupt governmental institutions, such patriarchies and networked family-owned businesses rely on each other for structural and economic support. They form alliances to yield power and influence over the weak governmental authorities, and borrow from each other in order to circumvent defunct banking systems (For more see, Claessens et al., 2000; Young et al.2008; Kim et al, 2004). Furthermore, in a double-digit unemployment rate, with matching inflation rates, family business owners feel obligated to prefer family or relatives for their livelihood. Along these lines, three responses were received from offshore executives responding to reported criticism by the workforce. Since the messages were similar, only one response from the executive was deemed comprehensive, it was provided to culminate discussion for the first finding<sup>4</sup>:

It is a norm and very common for dads to ask children to work for them. Actually it is expected by children, to be asked by their dads to lead and work them in family businesses. With high population growth, increasing international debts, sagging economy, the unemployment rate is phenomenally high. Students even after passing M. Comm with first class, are not able to find jobs.

For us, family and relations comes first. How can we be expected to let our children struggle in finding meaningful work? If my company can provide livelihood for hundreds of people, why is it a burden do the same for my children and relatives? It may be at odds with American or European views, but the realties on ground and economic structures are different. We have to be adaptive and practical in order to survive. There is an unspoken understanding, I will consider hiring a relative or a friend of executive

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<sup>4</sup> Executive response reported in American English.

at another family business since I know the favor will be returned in many ways. This is how businesses are run here.

It is futile to argue the merits of existing norms. Unless the entire socio-economic structures get revamped and government steps up in creating enough jobs for qualified adults, as is the case in the west, the existing business practices are not bound to change. We cannot compare an orange with an apple!

In a second set of findings while responding to a question: *What specifics, you want us (host) to know?*, participants candidly and strongly expressed their opinions; some extracts are as follows<sup>5</sup>:

Good morning for you is good night for us. Our time and working hours do not match. Your business practices are different than ours. Your communication style is different than ours. We celebrate two Eids in the same way as west celebrates Christmas. Your expectations are different and time line for projects are too demanding. To satisfy your demanding schedules we have to sacrifice a lot including our family. You make extra after 40 hours of work, we do not. There is a start time but no office end time for us.

I find it hard to understand since attending meeting 15 mins. late should be counted as attendance. We want time [for] our family and religion. I know it does not matter much to you but I try to be regular in praying on time. I have to take [r]ickshaw to office which is far 19 km from my flat. Here [it] is not like America. There are no guarantees when I will find rickshaw [and] at what time I will be on duty.

In our culture, family, religion and society are all equal. Our religion is a way of life and employment is one component of it. We understand that in West, lives are independent and they revolve around person's job and success. Our lives are inter-dependent and our lives don't revolve around a job. For us, parents are family and care includes family, neighbors and relatives.

There is ignorance about us. How we work/what are [we] about? We know about your culture but I am not sure if you know enough. We are competent and work very hard for less pay for everyone['s] benefit. The practices and exchanges are mostly directives. There is no collaboration, no respect or listening to our ideas... we also have good ideas. Frankly it feels that your way is the right only way... we have no control. That must be changed!

..sorry but at times it seems like a 3rd wave of colonialism. First was by land, next was by media & consumerism [consumerism] & now the third, control over our way of living & working. what is best for the developed countries is the only best thing for us. One size fits all, like we don't [have] any say but to adapt & survive.

In agreement with general consensus expressed by the workforce, Gul (2003) states that globalization does not ensure equal opportunity for all; it tends to favor the Western way of thinking as well as practices. It propagates the notions of one-directional hegemony, as the policies and rules of engagement are dictated by the West and for the West. The powerless developing countries have no choice but to submit to the will by opening their doors, sovereignty, people and culture to idea of globalization. Critics also argue that countries who were once unable to compete locally are now thrust into global competition for the West to stay competitive. In this circus of globalization, organizations in the developing world are quick to oblige, and transform themselves into a 'look alike' (Kochan et al, 1986) without paying due attention to its people or cultures (Arora et al. 2005; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001; Min & Santhapparaj, 2011).

In this vein, Takahashi, Ishikawa & Kanai (2012) critically questioned the viability of business theories and practices that are developed in the West, and are being imposed globally. It is quite evident from the

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<sup>5</sup> Participant responses reported in American English. For the sake of clarity, and if required, author insertions or observations are surrounded by square brackets [ ].



assertions that the offshore workforce is likely to resist any local organizational move that may be characterized by the imbalance of cross-cultural equity and power asymmetry between the host and the home (Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Moreover, for any hope of success, all factors and stakeholders, including external, internal, processes, people and culture must be considered for organizational transformations (DiCarlo, 2003; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001). As alluded by Zuberi (2005), if cultural citizenship is the amalgamation of individual and collective cultural rights, while anchored in the foundations of modern capitalism, than how well it unfolds in favor of developing economies and their cultures remains to be seen.

## LESSONS LEARNED

This case study offers numerous fascinating and perplexing perspectives. For this author, the realization can termed as a “Triple Dichotomy”. First, globalization with unfaltering intent to create equity for all, is, in reality limited to only a few. Second, in an effort to control the global markets, organizations willingly losing control of product quality and standards by going offshore. Finally, in their zeal to hold on to their practices, way of lives and values, interestingly, the offshore workforce needs the host’s help in introducing western practices and values of anti-nepotism and merit-based systems.

There is a compelling need for a double movement in dissociating the concept of globalization with westernization or homogenization, and instead bridging it as a truly wholesome and universal utility.

Organizations like cultures do not exist in vacuums. They exhibit the accumulated intelligence of internal, external, socio-economic and political environments of their people and countries. Technology or infrastructure is merely a single piece of the puzzle. Thus, in an effort to ‘look alike’, at the behest of global partners, the offshore organizations must be wary of such transformations at the expense of its people and cultures.

Finally, the balance and symmetry of power and the deliberate quest to understand each other will go a long way.

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