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From *Software Productisation* to *Portability* - While Managing Industrial and Technical Assistance Projects

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Abstract. This paper brings to attention alternative viewpoints for the management of industrial and technical assistance projects, resulting from the experience of the authors and stimulated by the information technology industry, productisation and portability. The portability concept comes along with a new instrument, the cultural profile radar.

The concept of *productisation*, born in the software industry (understood as the process of refining/polishing the already produced software and turn it into a [marketable] product), is usually associated with the service industries. Productisation of services assumes the association of tangible features (as physical location, facilities, people, etc.) with intangible service offerings.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of the authors' effort to explore the possibility to identify similar principles while managing industrial and technical assistance (international) projects (admittedly equivalent to complex services). Thus, the term *portability* denominates the replication of a successful project plan into another environment, transferring the same technologies, procedures, plans of activities and allocating similar resources.

The portability highly depends on the cultural diversity between team members, manager, organization, and host community, *ceteris paribus* (technology, procedures, resources). Since a perfect copy of a project is almost impossible, the attempt to understand the cultural profile of the project helps predicting possible problems due to cultural diversity and identifies suitable solutions.

Besides the term of project portability, the paper proposes the use of a *radar-type tool* to investigate the cultural profile of the project to be replicated. This radar portrays a set of cultural dimensions grouped along four quadrants (team, organization, manager, and host environment – i.e. the TOME radar). Significant cultural dimensions may refer to communication, interpretation of time, tolerance to ambiguity, distance to power, or multicultural experience, and may be selected depending on the industry and/or characteristics of the project.

There is not a standard of perfect cultural profile for all situations, but, ideally, successful project portability calls for compatible cultural profiles; this is the main conclusion, sustained by authors' experience in industrial and technical assistance international projects.

Keywords: project management, industrial and technical assistance international projects, productisation, project portability, multicultural teams, TOME radar

Introduction

Globalization comes with multiple and complex challenges that offer to company numerous development opportunities. Thus, the unproblematic transfer of knowledge and technologies, easy access to markets for goods, services and labour embody most significant influences. At the same time, it is harder and harder to achieve competitive advantages in this innovative, borderless, rapidly evolving environment, driven by the IT industry which can be a handicap or the leverage for getting a step ahead competition.

The concept of *productisation* was born in the software industry, driven, in principle, by the need to be more efficient (to lower and even cut the costs, to be more productive, *to use previous experience* under the permanent time pressure from both more demanding clients and increasing competition – nevertheless, all in the name of better client satisfaction). In general, it was understood as the process of refining and polishing the already produced software in order to turn it into a marketable product.

However, despite the explosive development of technology in general and information and communication technology in particular, the transition from *software production* to *software productisation* was not a smooth, calm and easy, linear evolution. It passed, along a decade or so, through dominant *software customization* (Oak, 2014). Customization made happier clients but the tailor-made product requires more time and effort, then higher cost and, inherently, higher prices paid by the clients (it is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the fairness of higher pricing or rightness of quality/price ratio).

Nevertheless, despite more rewarding prices, the unbalance between longer production cycle and slower production pace of tailoring – on one side – and higher productivity and efficiency business needs – on the other – created pressure and tension that ultimately have led to software productisation (Artz *et al.,* 2010). The key-element was actually an in-between, compromising solution: unique clients may have their custom-made expensive top quality products, and mass clients have their standard, non-customized software; but there is always a relative large category of clients that have their common needs (as bankers, large retailers, etc.) and can be served by productised software (cheaper than tailor-made one as higher research and development costs of customization are divided by the number of the customers belonging to the same category). Nevertheless, considering service complexity, in front of their productisation may be also challenges (Cross & Paquette, 2014).

The experience achieved in software productisation was inspirational for other service providers (consulting and engineering firms, architecture groups, and – notably – audit consulting companies). Thus, the software as a service (SaS) was born as well. And, from this point on, the idea of standardized (then industrialized in that sense of mass production) processes, and service industry got ground (Iorga & Scarlat, 2012; Iorga & Scarlat, 2014; Iorga *et al.*, 2014). As result, the productisation concept expanded and extended from software industry to other industries (Iorga *et al.*, 2013; Iorga, 2014; Iorga *et al.*, 2016), and it is currently associated with the service industries. Productisation of services assumes the association of tangible features (as physical location, facilities, people, etc.) with intangible service offerings.

Theorists and practitioners might have different (still not opposed) perspectives about productisation. For example, according to theorists, productisation is either linked to operations and quality management (University of Bath School of Management) or to innovation but also profitability (University of Teesside). University of Bath School of Management (http://www.bath.ac.uk/management/) favours: understanding the broader business context and its relationship to the successful development of new products; understanding the process of reconciling market requirements and product capabilities; negotiating the cross-functional challenges associated with productisation; understanding the key-principles (as QFD) of the productisation process; introducing key-tools and techniques associated with operations management and processes of new product development; understanding the product/service process principles (as volume, variety, variability). University of Teeside (https://www.tees.ac.uk/) champions innovation but also

profitability: economics of products - how to make money out of making things; risk management and control within innovation; making services accessible and competitive in narrow segments of the economy.

Yet the practitioners (business consultants) look at productisation as a whole (from engineering to marketing). Consultants like Coherence Consulting Partners (2017) aim to take what a company has and turn it into a repeatable product – which leads to scalable and higher company valuations; transform the current working practices to ones that scale and support a product, with minimum disruption to current revenue streams.

Thus, the productized process runs all the way through the company, from engineering to sales and marketing; and the product can be sold as a repeatable package appropriate to the market, providing maximum scalability for minimum risk.

The service productisation presents several obvious advantages: it is easy to explain and understand by the sales force – which can be more effective; it builds client confidence; service delivery is more consistent and repeatable – which leads to increased productivity, higher profitability, and higher customer satisfaction.

Inspired by productisation philosophy as well as by idea of service portability (from one mobile service carrier to another, common among mobile communication large company by mutual agreements), the authors – relying on their significant project management experience – investigated the possibility to identify similar principles while managing industrial and technical assistance international projects (admittedly equivalent to complex services) – in which multiculturalism proved to be a key-element (Scarlat *et al.*, 2014; Zarzu & Scarlat, 2015; Zarzu *et al*., 2014). Thus, the concept of *project portability* was born (Zarzu, 2017; Zarzu & Olson, 2017); it basically means the replication of a successful project plan into another environment, transferring the same technologies, procedures, plans of activities and allocating rather similar resources.

Consequently, the structure of this paper is as follows: portability concept explained; cultural profile and portability radar as a tool for portability; conclusions and further development, originality emphasized as well.

Portability Concept

Starting the Middle Ages people used various rudimentary banking instruments for savings or borrowings, in order to avoid material money exchange and to allow safe access to resources in various locations. These may be considered early precursors of portability. Later the term of portability defined a capability of the insurance and pension funds to transfer a person's benefits identically from one system to another, and without penalties. Recently portability describes the transfer of phone numbers from one provider to another, and also in IT&C portability designates a feature that permits users to access in cloud own applications and identical settings from different devices and using different internet providers.

Hence, portability defines a special characteristic or capacity of a service or project to be identically transposed into another system or setting. In the case of projects portability signifies the replication of a successful experience into a new environment. This envisioned clone inherits actually the know-how, and the experience, and sometimes is marginally improved through corrections or additions. Among the benefits of the process the reduction of the design phase originates important reserves. Any new implementation saves costs for market, product and cost analysis, for the selection of technologies and procedures, for planning activities and budgets. Generally, the analysis and design stages are counted as sunk costs, but through economies of scale there are mobilized fewer resources on each subsequent replication, even if there is always a part specific for each implementation depending on the environment, implementing team or manager.

Projects portability warrants a higher level of prediction thus reducing risks, given that objectives are identical, same plans, technologies and procedures are implemented, and there is full access to required resources. However, there is a part that is far from being predictable and that is linked to the cultural diversity observed between team members, team manager, implementing organization and host community in which the project is initiated.

The most visible problems relate to communication, to the proper interpretation of instructions from managers to team members and feedback from team members to managers (Gurău & Melnic, 2014). At the same time, it is important the dialog with the host community and the way the organization is communicating vision, objectives and strategies to partners. It is important the way the intervention and the projects are positioned. Modern companies consider expansions into new territories among top three priorities along with reduction of costs and business transformation, but there are challenges attached like talent acquisition, diversity and inclusion, learning and development (The Creative Studio at Deloitte, 2016), and here portability fits very well into the growing strategies.

Portability implies by definition cultural diversity due to the fact that a project is replicated into different environments. Most of the times the teams are heterogeneous, and changes in team composition and management are common, though maintaining personnel might be considered decreasing risks. Nevertheless, most attention should be paid to cultural traits of the host community and how those differ from one implementation to another. The transfer of know-how covers management and communication style besides the technologies and procedures.

Industrial projects and technical assistance projects are frequently replicated, saving design and planning costs, reducing also risks given they clone a success story. Also, relocation of successful managers, capable to lead multicultural teams in various cultural environments, may be one of the main portability benefits to the extent natives are included into the team to help understand local needs and characteristics and to cover social and political constrains (Koeppel *et al.,* 2007).

Replication of a project faces glitches regardless the fact that previous experiences proved validity of technologies and plans of actions. Even if implementing organization assigns same manager and maintains team composition, there is always the challenge of communication with the host community. However often times relocation of the same team and manager is not feasible, therefore building new partnerships becomes a priority for the implementer. Most obviously, adjustments are required for effective communication, proper succession or simultaneity of the activities, time and speed value, factors influencing project implementation (Lewis, 2008).

The implementing organization ideally promotes multiculturalism and tolerance through specific policies and strategies. Such an endeavour needs appropriate knowledge, instruments and supporting metrics (Kendrick, 2006). From the specific literature, numerous theories related to cultural diversity and from the survey developed within the recent research, it was identified a set of relevant dimensions with important impact on the success or failure of a project replica. These selected dimensions constitute the basis for the portability cultural radar, as factors influencing the proper replication of a project, given that technology, equipment and resources are the same, and given that similar factors have similar effects (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Thus it is possible to define a cultural profile of a project in which the cultural diversity can be displayed in four areas: team, team manager, implementing organization and host community where the project is implemented.

The team manager plays the main role in reaching trust, consensus and integration between team members. However, it is the organization deciding the magnitude of adjustments and associated costs for each independent case, but in the end flexibility of all partners involved is critical (Barki *et al*., 1993). Portability would finally support the idea that there are some attitudes, behaviours, organizational and managerial practices accepted and applied in most cultures (Gutterman, 2010).

In order to diminish the impact of cultural diversity, or at least to be able to predict if there are cultural risks, it is suggested an instrument for comparing cultural profiles of projects and that is portability

cultural radar. Actually, the cultural profile of a project is a blend of the four faces, one gathering the cultural specifics of the implementing organization, the next two portraying the implementing team and its manager, and the last one represented by the host community. In each of the four sectors there are analyzed the same cultural dimensions, selected by their impact on the project.

Cultural Profile – Portability Radar

An analysis of cultural profiles may give some indications on the propensity of the new project to integrate into the new environment, considering primarily the team members and manager. Understanding cultural frameworks allows implementing groups to predict cultural adaptability and alignment (Bryant, 2008; Jokinen, 2005; House *et al*., 2004; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

The planning of a replica should include analysis of the cultural compatibility simultaneously in the four areas: team, manager, implementing organization and host community. Identical clone of an implementation counts for similar cultural profiles, or at least matching characteristics in the four areas. Probably the most difficult endeavour is the cultural reconciliation between the implementing organization and the host community. If communication and values are very different the implementation should be reconsidered in terms of messages and approach. Hence special attention needs the selection of team members and project manager which are under the control of the implementing organization, and these are the priorities in most cases, but not connected to the cultural compatibility with the host community. Additionally, in spite of the global approach these days there are still constrains and both international corporations and individuals have to comply to local regulations, which may distort the known course of actions.

Even if the organization relocates the whole team together with the manager there are new relationships between team and organization, and the impact of the new environment may be important. Local culture interferes with the work relations and also with the personal lives of the people, fact that generates tremendous stress reflected on the performances. Organizations usually invest more in the technical resources rather than in the personnel, while specialized, knowledgeable experts should monitor diversity of behaviours, attitudes, and communications in order to support vision and mission statements of the company and reinforce values.

Corporations theoretically have the human resources departments dealing with issues like cultural diversity, heterogeneity and adjustments to organizational culture, and to the philosophy of the new environment in case of relocations. The mobility of own personnel and outsourcing phenomena tackle numerous departments, disciplines, and activities so the cultural aspects become a kind of noise compared to the technical, administrative priorities. Organizations use both relocations and constructions of diverse workforce to increase performance and here the cultural profile radar may be a helpful instrument, because it is important that the organization understands the cultural profiles of the team and also of the host community in the interest of the project success. Beyond problems that poor communication or differences in values may create, people become engaged and attain performances if they fit to the culture of the workplace. For example, only 49% of the American workforce is really engaged (Gallup, 2013). The indifference of people adds risks to the project that can tilt either way, good or bad and this phenomenon is universal, no matter which are the nationalities, industries, or level of education. The organization is the main factor for promoting engagement among team members through the manager and this would eventually reflect into the relationships with the other partners, especially with the communities in which projects are implemented.

At this research stage, eight general dimensions are considered – as identified in a limited survey and also suggested by the literature as the relevant axis for building the cultural profile radar: (i) Monochronic – polychronic dimension regarding time; (ii) High – low context communication dimension; (iii) Tolerance to incertitude cultural dimension; (iv) Multicultural experience; (v)

Individualism – collectivism cultural dimension; (vi) Etic – emic continuum; (vii) Distance to power; (viii) Learning interest.

These cultural factors and dimensions are already described in the literature, analyzed and standardized in terms of measurements; therefore the individual instruments are beyond the purpose of the present article.

The monochronic – polychronic dimension reflects the attitude of a community towards time, if time is a valuable resource and jobs are developed in a linear manner like in the monochronic orientation, or time is viewed in a cyclical course allowing simultaneous jobs as in the case of polychronic cultures. The different interpretation of time, different chronemic approaches, may lead to misunderstandings in the project implementation processes because the plan of activities is differently interpreted and deadlines have different meanings (Hall, 1990; Guerro & Gudykunst, 1996; Guirdham, 2005). It is important that all parties, implementing organization, project team, project manager and host community have the same time values and they synchronize plans, activities and expectations.

The specific of communication has an important impact on the success of a project, thus the different level of context, high – low, may humper the work relationships. For some groups, it is inappropriate to share personal details and it may be difficult to decode innuendoes, symbols and references to various stories and events, thus instructions and feedback are differently interpreted with direct effects on the realization of tasks (Hall, 1990; Groves & Feyerhem, 2011; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, Brett *et al*., 2006; Abbasi *et al*., 2014). It is important that all parties have a good communication, but the dialogue between implementing parties is crucial.

Another cultural aspect that influences project implementation is the tolerance to incertitude or the capacity of people and groups to accept diversity and risk factors. Intolerance to incertitude leads to conflicts and poor decision making and performance (Hofstede, 1983; Ting–Toomey, 1999; DeCarlo, 2004; Nummelin, 2005; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Chevrier, 2003). All parties involved into a project need to be able to tolerate incertitude, and while implementing parties have relevant information about project and even cultures, more difficult may be for the host community to accept a priori the change.

A higher tolerance to incertitude is associated to people with multicultural experience, important for the project manager, team and implementing organization to adapt and adjust to different cultural environments. People with multicultural experiences have better communication competences and avoid conflicts (Ting–Toomey, 1999; Sohmen, 2002; Kloppenborg, 2009; Barki *et al*., 1993).

It is important for the project the compatibility of the individualism – collectivism cultural dimension between the parties. It relates to the level of reconciliation, mobility and integration of people and groups and relates to their relationships (Hofstede, 1983; Trompenaars, 1996). The individualistic approaches are responsible for the risks and conflicts interpretations, choice of managerial solutions and competition over resources.

A special cultural dimension refers to etic – emic continuum which describes the association to the values of a group. The emic approach considers local values as main direction, while the etic groups have more general, global standards regarding behaviours and values (House *et al*., 1997; Lord & Maher, 1993). Emic view is internal, from inside, specific to the mono-cultural groups, while etic view is external, and specific to the multicultural groups (Morris *et al.*, 1999). Compatibility in the etic – emic approach is important for risk avoidance, for clarifications and reconciliation of managerial solutions. It is also relevant for the relationship between implementing parties and host community that have to accommodate new visions regarding behaviours and values.

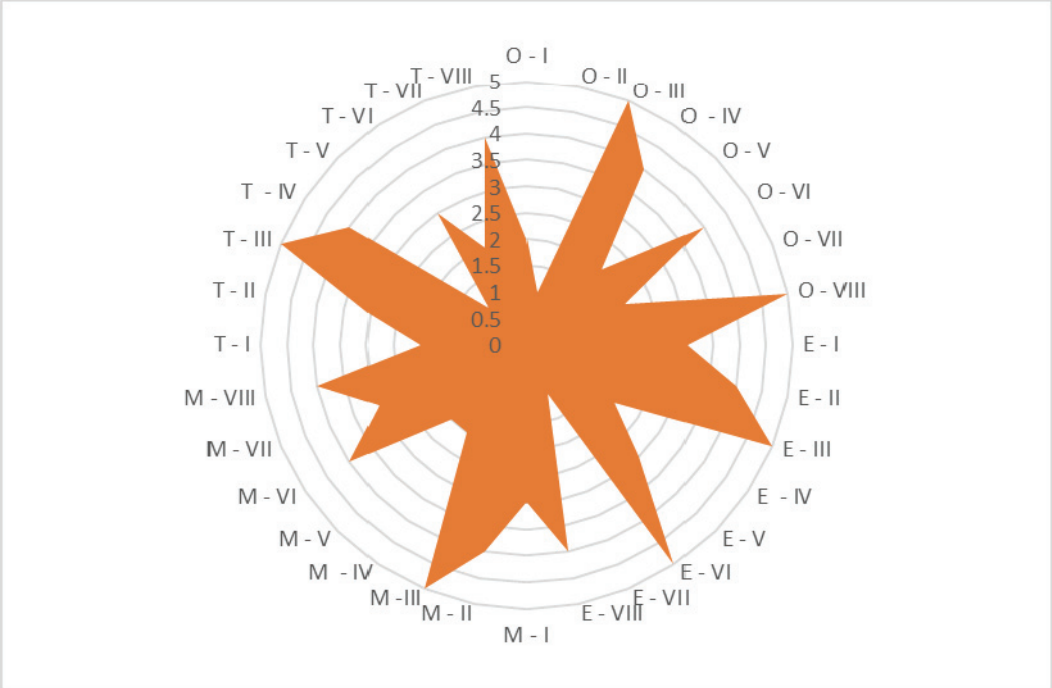
The distance to power cultural dimension is important for the proper implementation of a project if all parties understand and accept the lines of authority. It may seem unfair the distribution of the power between people and groups which lead to conflicts over special statute (Hofstede, 1983; Ely & Thomas, 2001; House *et al*., 2004). The disagreements and disputes over authority may have serious

negative effects when it comes to the realization of the plan of activities and the acceptance of the project solutions and decisions.

And finally, the learning interest is an important factor that impacts project implementation. The implementing organization accumulates information from every experience and facilitates the transfer of knowledge to teams and beneficiaries.

This characteristic may be paired with the long-term orientation defined by Hofstede (1983) to reflect the capacity of people and groups to absorb information and to transfer knowledge in order to properly implement a project, taking advantage of cultural diversity and various experiences (Hofstede, 1983; Thomas & Ely, 1996). Learning and replicating knowledge means building knowledge capital in the organization (Wenger *et al*., 2011).

The eight proposed dimensions define four cultural profiles: of the implementing organization (O), of the host community, or the environment in which the project is implemented (E), project manager (M) and team as a cultural group (T). The ideal cultural profile radar (*Figure 1*) would show four similar, or matching profiles for the proper implementation of a project, and similar profile radars for the proper replica of a project. Dealing with heterogeneous groups means solving conflicts, aligning moral incompatibilities, avoiding stereotypes and biases.



	Cultural dimensions
I	High - Low Communication
II	Tolerance of uncertainty
III	Multicultural experience
IV	Monochronic - Polychronic
V	Individualism - Collectivism
VI	Etic - Emic
VII	Power Distance
VIII	Learning Interest

	Implementation partners
T	**T**eam members
O	Implementing **O**rganization
M	Team **M**anager
E	Implementing **E**nvironment / Host community

Figure 1. The **TOME** (cultural profile) radar

Some of the dimensions are practically irreconcilable, like monochronic *vs*. polychronic approaches or high vs. low context communication because they obstruct the direct concurrence. Etic *vs.* emic approaches, distance to power or individualism vs. collectivism dimensions seriously hinder the correct execution of a plan and create conflicts within team members. Less dramatic are the differences in terms of tolerance to incertitude, multicultural experience, or learning interest, and actually matching these characteristics is like a bonus for the successful implementation of the project.

Conclusions and Further Development

Despite the increasing presence of multi-culturally developed projects in various environments and the growing importance of diversity there are still frequent cultural challenges for organizations.

Portability resembles somehow a recycling and recovery process of concluded projects resulting in important savings. The larger the covered area and the number of replica the bigger the economies are. Generally, any project is a learning opportunity, both for individuals (creating human capital) as well as for the group (creating social capital), allowing knowledge transfer in specific fields (Wenger *et al*., 2011).

Relocation implies always undesirable transformations but to a certain extend responsible managers may be proactive and predictive in terms of matching people with jobs, places and groups. However, sharing knowledge and experiences from a wider pool of people builds the human capital of the organizations. Recruiting should focus more on identification of people fitting the culture of the teams and the organization rather than looking exclusively for precise skills and expertise.

If communication diversity is identified, organization may take some proactive actions by presenting cultural differences, creating common communication arenas like own blogs with news, celebrations and acknowledgments.

Further research is necessary (Zarzu, 2017) to create a library of profiles and to monitor the level of precision for the cultural profile radar.

Originality

The concept of portability, even previously known, has a new approach when used to define replication of projects. Of course, there are no identical projects (by definition projects are different) but implementations may follow a model to benefit from lessons learned and economies of scale. Every new implementation has new conditions and the objective is diminishing risks from unpredictable influences.

Portability best fits industrial projects implemented mainly by multinational corporations (like construction of cement factories in different locations in different countries), and also technical assistance projects implemented by international aid organizations, usually forming thematic programs (like UN programs for environment protection or illiteracy eradication in different regions).

The cultural profile radar is an instrument attached to portability concept and is destined to predict cultural incompatibilities between the implementing organization, the team members, manager and the host community. It may be helpful in two ways, one by just comparing the four profiles and predict or adjust implementation of independent projects, but mainly it is important for the comparison of the complete profiles for a new project, clone of an implemented project.

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