

# THE RHETORIC OF CULTURE AS AN ACT OF CLOSURE IN A CROSS-NATIONAL SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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# THE RHETORIC OF CULTURE AS AN ACT OF CLOSURE IN A CROSS-NATIONAL SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

*Complete Research*

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## Abstract

*Global software teams work on interdependent tasks across geographies, time zones, and cultures. Studies of cross-national software teams report that the main challenges are sharing knowledge, creating trust, and establishing common ground. In this study we examine another challenge—the use of the word “culture” as an exclusionary act of closure. As theorized by Metiu, who builds on Weber, closure occurs when one group seeks to preserve the advantages of their situation relative to another group. We conducted an ethnographic study of a cross-national software department with members in Denmark and the Philippines. We found that “culture” was invoked by employees in the Danish office to explain failed collaborations, but not by employees in the Philippines. Filipino employees formulated other explanations for problems, and actively resisted cultural explanations. We argue that employees in the Danish office used a “rhetoric of culture” as an act of closure, and we focus on technology choices and behavior as they were impacted by closure.*

*Keywords: Closure, Exclusion, Cross-national software development teams, Rhetoric of culture*

## 1 Introduction

Global software groups working in distributed settings are increasingly common (Malone 2004, Carmel and Tjia 2005, Conchúir et al. 2009, Noll et al. 2010, Ehrlich and Cataldo 2012, Tang et al. 2012). To examine problems of cross-national collaboration, we conducted an ethnographic study of “GlobalSoft” (a pseudonym), a software company based in Denmark that has expanded operations by offshoring to several locations. The findings are part of a larger longitudinal study of cross-national collaboration within a GlobalSoft department with employees in Denmark and the Philippines. The software department we studied had already experienced some of the typical challenges of cross-national work reported in the literature such as sharing knowledge (Cramton 2001), creating trust and social relations (Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1999), and establishing common ground (Olson and Olson 2000). This paper focuses on acts of closure and how they affected work relations and technology use.

Many studies of cross-national groups point to cultural differences as a key challenge in managing projects (see King and Torkzadeh 2008, Kumar and Jha 2010). Asymmetric relationships and subgroups often emerge in such work units (Chand et al. 2009). Group members construct categories to differentiate themselves from one another (Cramton and Hinds 2005, Metiu 2006, Marrewijk 2010). Categorization may be based on “any convenient characteristic...including race, social background, language, religion, and gender” (Metiu 2006). Asymmetries and subgrouping may lead to closure, which was theorized by sociologist Max Weber as competitive behavior that occurs when “one group of competitors takes some externally identifiable characteristic of another group of [actual or potential] competitors...as a pretext for attempting their exclusion” (Weber 1978). Weber noted that acts of closure potentially exclude others from social and economic resources (see also Bottero 2005).

For example, Metiu studied how a group of US developers in a cross-national team secured desirable tasks for themselves by interacting infrequently with their Indian counterparts, exhibiting a generally critical attitude toward them, and often ignoring them. These actions constituted a “strategy of closure” to maintain resources for the US developers (Metiu 2006).

In the cross-national department we studied, the higher status workers were Danish, and lower status workers Filipino. By “high” and “low” status we refer to differences in decision-making power and influence on tasks and work processes. Danish workers were responsible for sales, client relations, developing software architectures, programming, and assigning and scoping work tasks. Filipino workers were responsible for programming modules of the software products Danish managers deemed the least complicated, and for testing. Danish employees evaluated the quality of the work done by Filipino workers, but not vice-versa. In this setting, the “identifiable characteristic” of closure, from the point of view of Danish workers, was *culture*. Earlier studies of cross-national work groups focused primarily on the concept of culture and how to mitigate the problems of cultural differences (Søderberg and Holden 2002, Krishna et al. 2004, Kayan et al. 2006, Diamant et al. 2008, Deshpande et al. 2010). We found that questions of culture revolved not around cultural misunderstandings but issues of power and influence. We contribute to a growing body of literature (Mahadevan 2011, Ravishankar et al. 2013) investigating the role of culture in terms of power relations in cross-national teams. We show how higher status employees sought to protect their tasks and roles by invoking “culture” as the root of collaboration problems. The vague formulation of “culture” was more subtle and ambiguous than, for example, deliberately ignoring someone or being highly critical, as observed in other research (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998, Metiu 2006). We show that the rhetorical use of culture was a clear pattern of behavior, and was used only by employees in the Danish office. As we will discuss, it appears that collaboration with Filipino employees represented a threat to the existing order of work for the Danish employees, and even possible future employment.

Our research concerns *informal* acts of closure. Formal means of closure occur at the institutional level (Weber 1978, Weeden 2002, Bidwell 2013) - for example, policies privileging one group over another. GlobalSoft was organizationally committed to equitable collaboration between national groups. But the imposition of offshoring destabilized work practices for the Danish workers, leading to informal closure. Top management offered the rationale that offshoring would allow the company to remain competitive:

*It [offshoring] is driven by the market. We do not—this is very important—we do not relocate jobs to the Philippines or China. We are moving tasks, so in a growing market we will be able to sustain the work force in Denmark, assuming that the people we have are willing and capable of changing their roles and professional profiles. But as I have...said...there is no job guarantee. (Vice president, Denmark)*

But many employees in Denmark questioned the rationale behind offshoring. A competitive edge derived from employing Filipino workers is a claim that remains unproven as the company has not conducted a comparative study of the cost difference between work done at the primary location and work done offshore. A recent study found that negative attitudes are likely to emerge when employees see little benefit from offshoring (Zimmermann 2012). Danish employees remained skeptical towards offshoring, and tried to maintain tasks and decision-making power locally through informal acts of closure. Metiu argues that more research is needed regarding “how the actions of group members exclude others [even] when their official organization is committed to the cooperation” (Metiu 2006). We therefore ask: *How are informal patterns of closure enacted in cross-national collaboration?* A contribution of our work is to point to the rhetorical use of the word *culture* as an act of closure in cross-national distributed work, something not yet reported in the literature as far as we know. By applying a sociological perspective to IS offshore studies we also contribute with much needed insights to the cultural and informal management mechanisms (Gregory 2010).

## 2 Methods

GlobalSoft incorporated in Denmark in 1994. It employs about 1700 people in Denmark, China, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and the Philippines. Filipino employees originally worked for an independent supplier of programming resources hired by GlobalSoft. In 2009, GlobalSoft bought the supplier, and hired its 85 employees. Employees merged with an existing department in Denmark. Danish employees were generally older and more experienced than Filipino employees who were often hired straight from the universities, and were younger and paid less than their Danish counterparts. Employees collaborated through several forms of mediated communication including email, instant messaging (IM), video meetings, and shared documents.

Data collection took place from December 2010 to October 2013. We studied a single department in a single company, so there were no differences in corporate policy across the Danish and Filipino workers. Study participants were highly professional and worked with expertise within their fields. We conducted on-site observations in Denmark and the Philippines, shadowing employees, participating in video meetings, and observing everyday practices. The data include 28 audio-recorded and transcribed interviews (19 in Denmark, 9 in the Philippines), each about an hour long. We interviewed, observed, and interacted with developers, testers, IT-architects, project leaders, and managers. In this paper we refer to everybody as employees or workers, but we occasionally call out the managerial role. We spent a total of almost four months in the Philippines (December 2010, July 2011, November 2011, and January 2012), and 12 months in Denmark. During data collection, we discussed initial findings with the workers in casual conversation and in official presentations and workshops. Two video-recorded workshops were held in the Philippines. One took place with a group of managers and another with a group of developers. Only employees from the Philippines participated in the workshops. Researchers asked participants to brainstorm about the main challenges in the collaboration and discuss possible solutions to these challenges. We used the presentations and workshops to interrogate and validate our findings. Finally, we examined video recordings of work practice, as well as internal company documents, requirements specifications, and official materials.

We applied an open-ended study design inspired by grounded theory (Strauss and Glaser 1967). Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically read for broad themes and then coded according to the finer-grained themes discussed in the findings. The themes were categorized using a text-analysis tool called TAMS Analyzer where the field notes and interviews were coded creating categories such as “communication\_patterns”, “relation\_work” or “instant\_messaging”. The variety of data collection methods (interviewing, participant observation, workshops, screen recordings) helped establish a grounded understanding of the complexities of cross-national development practices. Analyzing the qualitative data required several iterations of reading, coding, and creating write-ups to connect the themes that emerged (Eisenhardt 1989). We engaged in formal discussions about the themes after reading the data and collectively converged on interpretations, making sure each point was well supported in the data in multiple places to support the reliability and validity of the findings. We presented our work for a group of researchers at an internal research seminar to gather feedback on the initial findings. Many of the findings are based on employee reflections of the collaboration practices, supported by our observations. The rhetorical use of culture became evident in interviews, workshops, and presentations when employees reflected on the collaboration. These reflections took place in the presence of the interviewers or members of their own national group. Culture was rarely mentioned in cross-national conversations.

## 3 Findings

In the following section we discuss how Danish workers' assertion of cultural difference affected the collaboration. We describe the enactment of closure and the consequences for the work and for the use of collaborative tools. Finally, we analyze the underlying motives for closure in the collaboration.

### **3.1 Assertion of and resistance to notions of cultural difference**

Danish employees often asserted that culture was the underlying reason for failures in the team's collaborative work. For example, a Danish manager said in an interview: *"The largest barriers are often determined by culture."* Another manager told us: *"They [Filipino workers] live in an entirely different world. What can we possibly talk about?"* In another interview, a third Danish manager said: *"These cultural things which we [Danish workers] all know about, well, people from outside our borders do not know these things, and that can easily cause misunderstandings."* In interviews, we asked the Danish managers to elaborate on the meaning of these cultural "things." They would often point to language. For instance, one manager said that culture is a *"a language issue."* Another said:

*Ok, maybe I put too much into the word culture. But it is exactly things like language. Is it culture? I do not know. But the fact that you have to speak a second language is definitely a barrier for picking up the phone in the morning.*

Here a manager trades on the ambiguity of the word culture. At first it appears that he might mean something very broad, very pervasive. But when asked to explain, he narrows "culture" to language, and remarks how it makes calling workers in the Philippines—to whom he will have to speak in English—difficult. In another interview, a manager said: *"[M]isunderstandings can emerge, and it is not a question of apportioning blame. Instead we have to remember that we do not share the same logical background in both culture and language, right?"* This manager indicated that language could cause misunderstandings, but he also expressed a strong statement of difference arising from cultural logics. In this view, Danish and Filipino workers lacked a "shared logical background" and misunderstandings were thus not surprising.

Another Danish manager said: *"We do not think that all of them [Filipino workers] reveal themselves as they maybe would have done if they were in Denmark with a Scandinavian origin and were not culturally different."* Danish managers saw themselves as members of an outspoken culture typical of "Scandinavia", as opposed to quieter Filipino workers. We noticed that in meetings it was often Filipino managers who asked and fielded questions, while other Filipino workers remained quiet. The Danish manager's statement draws sharp lines between those of Danish/Scandinavian origin and those who are "culturally different." Lost in this characterization is the open discourse of Filipino managers who spoke freely at meetings. Culture was invoked not only as belonging to "Denmark," but also as essentially "Scandinavian," constructing Scandinavia as a locale with specific cultural qualities (such as outspokenness) the Danish workers valued. The concept of culture was used rhetorically to assert a stable state of difference. Such statements expressed sentiments shared by many employees in the Danish office.

Filipino employees, by contrast, resisted cultural interpretations as a reason for miscommunication. When asked about such differences in an interview, one Filipino manager said, *"[Culture] is not as big as I think people say it is. Because a lot of it isn't culture specific."* Instead, the manager enumerated other factors important to collaboration such as geographical distance, time difference, and language. She mentioned language as a problem but did not subsume it under culture as some Danish managers did. In an interview, a Filipino worker pointed to the time difference, saying, *"It's really problems with the time zone."* This worker spoke in specific, non-cultural terms, highlighting a specific condition affecting collaboration.

Filipino workers argued that Danish workers' poor communication practices led to problems. Even a Danish manager who had spent time working in the Philippine office said during a workshop: *"People confuse poor communication with cultural differences. It is very popular to say that it is a cultural issue. I actually do not think there are that many cultural issues."* This manager resisted the "popular" cultural interpretation of collaboration problems. He offered a narrowly scoped claim about communication practices bearing on the problem.

### **3.2 Attributing cultural differences to explain the challenges of work tasks, everyday practices, and the use of collaborative tools**

In this section we discuss specific problematic work tasks managers in Denmark often attributed to cultural differences.

#### **3.2.1 Coordination of time difference**

The time difference of seven hours would typically allow an overlap of only about two hours in which both Danish and Filipino employees were at work. The Filipino workers noted that the Danish employees did not always acknowledge the time difference: “*I am actually surprised how many people ask me what time it is here,*” one manager in the Philippine office commented at a workshop. At the workshop another Filipino manager said:

*They [Danish employees] sometimes forget that we have a time difference, so it is basically that they email us at 8.00 a.m. Danish time and they want the task done on that same day and it is kind in the afternoon for us, so...*

Filipino workers, on the other hand, were well aware of the time in Denmark. They had clocks on their computers as well as clocks on the wall showing the time in Denmark. Danish employees had no indicators of Philippine time in their work environments. A manager in the Philippine office found the “forgetting” of the time difference somewhat frustrating: “*These [Danish employees] are people that we work for all the time. They should know this, right?*” “Not knowing the time” was often a problem for Filipino workers, forcing them to stay late or turn in work a day late due to delay in email responses. One Danish employee said he would sometime mitigate the effects of the time difference by replying to emails before he went to work in the morning. However, such actions were not typical for Danish workers. Given that the employees were highly professional in their training, expertise, and self-identity, “not knowing the time” had no positive interpretation for workers in the Philippines.

#### **3.2.2 Requirement specifications**

Requirements specification documents were a significant instigator of acts of closure. Filipino workers often did not understand the documents. Danish employees said the problems were cultural, indicating that they expected shared general knowledge, while Filipino employees thought the documents were poorly written. In a presentation, a Danish manager shared his views on writing the documents, using the forceful word “barrier”:

*[I] think that our biggest challenge is specifying well enough...since they [Filipino workers] typically say that we have not specified well enough. “Oh but I believe we have.” “Well, we do not think so,” and then we dance around the issue. But it is also a question about...I believe there is a cultural barrier here.*

Danish workers linked the challenges of requirements documents to lack of a shared culture. Culture thus became a barrier for dealing with the challenge. We asked why it was so difficult to understand the requirements documents. A Filipino manager said:

*When we do these things [projects] it is shocking how many times we start off with a network diagram. You know, there is a database, there is a business layer, and there is a presentation layer, and there is all these things. What does it do? I mean just that, what is the context? I think that is the hard part...is getting them [Danish employees] to take that kind of fresh look at it and say what is this all about.*

The Filipino manager asserted a problem of “context” meaning that domain knowledge was often underspecified, or altogether absent. Projects were introduced with abstract presentations of technical requirements depicted as network diagrams, databases, and so on. But there was often little information about the purpose of the system and the domain. At a workshop in the Philippines, one manager said: “*They [Danish workers] assume that we have the domain knowledge when we don’t.*” Another manager replied: “*Actually, I don’t think they see it as domain knowledge. I think they see it as common sense and...common sense is not so common. Common sense to one person is not common*

*sense to another person.*” Filipino employees needed more exposition of the domain and its properties to understand the nature of the system for which they were writing software.

While observing in the Philippine office, one developer asked us if we knew the meaning of a “P-number,” something he saw on a workflow sketch. Understanding the P-number requires knowledge of Danish taxation and government requirements. It is not common knowledge, and we had to look it up ourselves. We found a public Danish webpage on taxation (in Danish of course), and we were able to translate the meaning of the term. The Filipino employee could then continue his work. The researchers later learned that concepts such as P-number had been explained on more than one occasion both through presentations and documents. The episode with the P-number shows that both Danish and Filipino employees agreed that domain knowledge can be difficult to convey across national boundaries. The employees in Denmark had tried to convey the taxation concept, and their sentiment was that cultural differences must be the explanation for continued misunderstandings. Filipino employees opposed the cultural explanation by saying that the problem was that the way things were communicated hindered shared understanding. When Danes invoked a cultural explanation it stood out as a rhetorical move that foreclosed negotiation on how to meet the challenges related to domain knowledge and “common sense”.

### **3.2.3 Communication practices**

We observed how employees in Denmark enacted closure through cultural interpretations and language regarding simple matters of everyday communication. For instance, Filipino employees preferred to address potential concerns in email, rather than through “outspoken” discussion. A Filipino employee we interviewed said:

*When they [Danish employees] feel the need to speak they will just say it, and with us, we would tend to sort of think first: “Is it polite to say this?”...Sometimes if we are in doubt, instead of just asking directly, we would reserve it and probably just send it by an email.*

Cultural patterns of action are invoked in this statement, but in more situated, nuanced terms than the Danish employees’ universalist assertions of cultural difference. The Filipino worker says, “*we would tend to sort of...*” using hedging language that connoted less definite tendencies as opposed to immutable cultural qualities. The worker explains the issue as a matter of preferred communication practice. It is not that Filipinos “do not reveal themselves,” but that they choose a different medium of communication. This discourse stands in contrast to the Danish manager we quoted above who said, “But it is exactly things like language.” He identified language as problematic, but at the same time kept the door open to other, unspecified aspects of culture (“things like”) as sources of difference between workers. The Filipino worker’s explanation of the problem regarding media choice preserves the possibility of negotiation and change. With some discussion, the email might turn into a Skype call or a conversation with an on-site manager, or some course of action moving toward problem resolution. It is more difficult to negotiate collaborative solutions when difference based on national origin—something an employee cannot change—is constructed as the root of the problem.

While Danish employees often generically mentioned the “language barrier” as a cultural problem, Filipino employees expressed concerns about language pursuant to the fact that they often received emails and documents written in Danish. During a workshop in the Philippine office a manager said: “*We had that email that was sent to [the whole department], all in Danish. And we had to reply: ‘Oh, please write in English, because you have Filipino counterparts.’*” Sometimes Filipino workers could manage the Danish by using tools such as Google Translate, but it was far from an optimal solution. We observed the translation issues when we shadowed Filipino developers. Many had Danish vocabulary written on the wall at their workstations, and they knew the keyboard shortcuts to specific Danish letters. A few were even able to translate words and sentences in Danish because they had grown so used to the use of Danish. The workflow sketches, for example, were all in Danish, and, as Danish observers, we were often asked to translate passages in the sketches. Filipino employees had clearly tried to adapt to some of the translation issues, but it was obviously difficult to understand the

full context of the Danish language. Filipino workers experienced language as a practical problem for the collaborative work, but they did not construe it as a problem of culture.

### **3.2.4 Closure mediated through technology**

We observed how employees in Denmark used collaborative tools in enacting closure. The collaboration suffered from problems in the use of mediated communication such as email and instant messaging. For example a Filipino employee said in an interview, *“Whenever we sent them emails it was dead silence.”* Filipino employees were often dependent on getting answers to questions or status confirmations from Danish colleagues before they could move ahead with their work. Lack of response left them stranded. They felt it was generally difficult to get hold of Danish colleagues. A Filipino worker said that Danish workers seemed to be constantly offline: *“I guess that this is just the hard part wherein you really can’t get anything from them because they are out of reach or [you get] no replies from emails.”* This feeling was echoed by other Filipino employees who generally applied a more fluid approach to mediated communication tools. They were constantly engaged in online conversations and sometimes used instant messaging with people sitting right next to them! In interviews these workers explained that they preferred mediated communication because it was less intrusive. Their colleagues could keep working without being interrupted. Conversations could be archived for later use. By contrast, Danish employees were often marked “offline” in Microsoft Communicator (their instant messaging system), thereby delaying communication. When we asked a Danish manager in an interview about response time problems he said: *“Well, the issue about us [Danish employees] responding late is just the tip of the iceberg, right? What is really behind these things? They [Filipino employees] do not tell us...because it is a very different culture.”* Here we have a cultural iceberg upon which Filipino employees’ concerns about response times are taken to be a small signal of a larger problem stemming from different cultures. From the Filipino workers’ point of view, lack of availability in one of the key official channels of communication foreclosed open negotiation of problems. As one employee in the Philippines said:

*Yeah, so it is quite hard...and there is Communicator all the time, and that helps as well, but for this project some of the key persons that needed to be asked were always away. I guess they are with a client or something.*

Being “always offline” is charitably explained as “being with a client or something.” This formulation offers the benefit of the doubt, although given the professional context, the Filipino worker was well aware that employees in Denmark do not constantly have client meetings. Being left with “dead silence” provoked anxiety that someone might be angry: *“I have sent you the email and then there would be dead silence, and I would not know if he was mad at me because I am asking all these questions.”*

Acts of closure were much less apparent during video meetings. First, members were present in the meetings, so they could communicate directly with one another. Unlike email and IM, which often produced “dead silence,” members from both offices attended regular, weekly video meetings. There was a meeting for testers and one addressing technical issues. The test meetings usually consisted of one Danish tester, 1-2 Filipino testers, and one Filipino systems analyst. These meetings were not only task-focused but also helped establish common ground. The technical meetings had a Danish IT-architect and 1-5 Filipino developers. Those attending the testing and technical meetings came to share understanding of the complexities of the work, and the dependencies between pieces of the work done in both locations. Culture was never mentioned as a problem (although it might be brought up in a playful manner and sometimes included humorous exchanges). It is easy to ignore email and instant messages because there are so many of them, and a technology such as IM can be turned off, but video conferencing requires the commitment of scheduling and a mediated version of face-to-face interaction. Workers from both offices attended the meetings. The relative difficulty of enacting closure during videoconferences became an asset for collaborative problem solving in the cross-national team.

### **3.2.5 Closure as being out of the loop**

What is striking about the incidents of closure we have presented was their one-sided character. The effects of closure were felt only in the Filipino office. Of course most employees there were Filipino, but there were also some Danish employees who had spent time in the Philippines. Danish employees who had worked in the Philippine office for longer than three months came to agree with many of the things Filipino workers said, including the feeling of being “out of the loop”. If challenges such as time difference and response time were truly cultural issues, the researchers would not likely have heard the following from Danish employees in the Philippines: *“I too lost something, so it is not cultural. It is purely about the distance that makes a difference.”* This employee had had a long tenure with GlobalSoft, yet he felt the impact of distance during the time he spent in the Philippines. We spoke to other Danish employees who had worked in the Philippine office and they shared similar stories. A Filipino manager said, *“You are out of the loop, you are far away, you get forgotten.”* This finding is consistent with the literature on problems of distance (Olson and Olson 2000, Cramton 2001, Hinds and Bailey 2003, Hinds and Mortensen 2005).

### **3.3 Understanding motives for closure**

Why would employees in Denmark practice exclusionary acts of closure? It is a difficult task to identify underlying motives behind actions in a global collaboration because of the complexity of the activity. However, we point to conditions that may suggest why we observed a consistent pattern in which only Danish workers practiced closure. These conditions include uncertainty regarding the future, anxieties about job security, resistance to change, and questioning the efficiency and economic value of offshoring.

#### **3.3.1 Developing a global mindset**

The Danish employees had a history of working independently, which they very much enjoyed. In an interview, a Danish worker described the situation before the Filipino workers joined the company:

*This department is established on the basis that we develop everything by ourselves. We do not have a good history of establishing partnerships. If we want a security component and we know that a company in town makes it, then we would still prefer to make it ourselves. Because this way we can maintain it if it does not work. Which is why we have a long history of developing everything by ourselves. We feel better that way. That is the culture in this department.*

A preference for working independently was validated, in the eyes of the Danish workers, when the Filipino workers first joined GlobalSoft and continued using fixed-priced contracts, a practice from their supplier days. Danish employees felt that this arrangement did not commit Filipino workers to full responsibility for project outcomes, and that Filipino employees were mostly concerned with covering their estimated hours. Several Danish employees we interviewed suspected Filipino employees of padding time estimates. Suspicion and resentment over perceived responsibility created an “us-them” situation. A Danish employee said in an interview, *“We act a lot like ‘them and us,’ in my experience.”*

However, the contract was changed during the second year, in 2010. All employees were made equally responsible for project outcomes. Just as we began observations, a key project that affected several GlobalSoft departments was launched. Initially it was to be developed solely by Filipino workers. But shortly after the project started, the Danish employees who were involved left the company. The new people assigned to the project did not believe the Filipino employees would be able to deal with complexity of the work, and they reassigned 50% of the work back to Denmark. This reassignment was made despite increased costs and delays. Incidents such as the task reassignment, and suspicions about budgetary practices, indicate the mistrust Danish workers felt, and their troubled sense that established patterns of work in which they had long been comfortable were being disrupted by new global arrangements.

Filipino workers, by contrast, had “always been global.” They started with GlobalSoft when it was an outside supplier, and the work spanned national boundaries from the beginning. Understanding how to manage cross-national work was part of being a professional. A Filipino manager spoke in an interview about professionalism: “[P]eople hav[e] to get used to being more professional, and people hav[e] to realize...that there's a global component in the work that we're doing.” A global-inflected sense of professionalism was evident in patterns of social media use. Filipino employees were more or less constantly online, typically conducting several simultaneous instant messaging conversations. In Denmark, employees often marked themselves “offline” by default in Microsoft Communicator, making it difficult for Filipino colleagues to approach them. Danish workers would walk to each other's desks and have short discussions, or talk across the tables in open office space. While the Danish employees were somewhat older (suggesting a possible generational effect), they were sophisticated technical workers and could have easily chosen to use mediated communication tools more often had they wished to.

Comfort speaking English interacted with media choices. Filipino workers were accustomed to English. Their conversations moved fluidly between Tagalog (the local language) and English. Being an American colony for 50 years had resulted in a high proficiency and familiarity with English in the general Philippine population. Filipino workers thus did not mind picking up the phone. Though English is the official work language at GlobalSoft, and Danish employees were proficient in English, they spoke Danish at the office, choosing English only to talk to Filipino colleagues. They were less comfortable picking up the phone than Filipino workers. At a workshop in the Philippines, a Filipino manager said: “Some people [Danish employees] will not take the call. We had experiences when we were asking to just take a face call [a video call] and they refused. They would rather do the communication by email or chat.” When we asked the manager why Danish employees refused calls, she said, “They were concerned that their English was not good enough, so that was the issue.” Danish employees were not completely unaware of their tendency to stick to what they were used to and the resultant problems. During an interview, a Danish manager said:

*But if we [Danish employees] were more willing to accept this new model in Denmark, if people could convince themselves that this is exciting...instead of seeing it as something threatening. But we are so strained by the way we do things in Denmark.*

Questions about job security (“there is no job guarantee”), Danish workers' future roles in the company, disruptions of historical work patterns, and the less practiced use of English, were critical factors that influenced interactions with Filipino employees. Instead of embracing the collaboration and a global orientation, Danish employees resisted change by invoking culture as “a barrier”. Closure arose from tensions surrounding a desire to maintain valued historical ways of working.

### **3.3.2 Uncertainty about the future**

The transition to working with offshore colleagues created increasing uncertainty and pressure on Danish employees. A Danish manager said, “There is no doubt that people are scared of losing their jobs, especially during these times where you cannot find anything else, right?” A Danish manager told us that even the management group did not know exactly which roles would be needed in the near future. In an interview he said, “A few people have dared to ask the question: ‘How does this affect my job? And what will my future look like?’ And these questions are still hard to answer.” The Danish manager admitted that the role and future development of the Philippine office were unclear even to the management group. He said, “[W]e have not yet reached a structured process where we know exactly [what will happen]...It grows organically, how much we use the Filipinos.” Offshoring was undertaken by GlobalSoft to lower perceived project costs. Lower bids could be prepared, which could potentially create or maintain jobs. A Danish manager told us during an interview, “In reality, the people most dedicated to offshoring and the advantages of it, are the top management group.” The perceived advantages of offshoring were cost-reduction, scalability, and competitiveness. But offshoring also increased the need for coordination and communication. Many Danish workers found

it difficult to see the benefits of offshoring, observing that project management often became more complex. In an interview, a Danish manager described how an offshore project “[becomes more] stringent and requires more documentation and coordination, and has a larger risk than having your own team.” The risks of delays and cost overruns concerned project leaders who dealt with the day-to-day running of the projects.

Danish employees outside top management experienced the extra coordination as a burden, and expected problems when working with Filipino employees. A Danish employee said in an interview, “*The Filipinos have delivered as expected with the usual extra iterations, which makes the project more costly and therefore more costly for us.*” He referred bluntly to the “usual” extra work expected when Filipino workers were involved, which he attributed to added iterations arising from mistakes and misunderstandings. The additional workload increased costs and sometimes delayed projects. Many Danish employees we spoke to shared these views. There was considerable skepticism regarding the actual economic benefits of offshoring. Zimmerman reported similar findings in her study of global software development groups of German and Indian developers, observing that negative attitudes towards an offshoring partner could result in reluctance to transfer “non-routine, complex tasks, in order to reduce quality issues and additional workload” (2012).

We do not know of any economic analysis that brings delays and failures into calculating true costs at GlobalSoft. Danish employees worried about the “invisible hours” in which highly paid Danish IT-architects spent much time correcting minor misunderstandings instead of using their competences more effectively. Some Danish employees did not believe there had been a single offshoring success story. One said in an interview, “*There has not been a success story yet. If they existed they would have been talked about. I am certain of that.*” Another told us, “*The history you hear in hallways is that what they [Filipino workers] deliver is scaled inadequately and performance is generally poor.*” Skepticism and doubt about the adequacy of offshoring put Danish workers in a defensive position in which acts of closure were expressions of concern over job uncertainty and frustrations regarding the efficacy of altering work patterns that had served well in the past.

## 4 Discussion

We have described how Danish employees used the rhetoric of culture as an act of closure. Strategies reported in other studies, such as lack of interaction and criticism, are very direct, and convey pointed messages, whereas the rhetorical acts of closure we discovered were more subtle. In Metiu’s case, the Indian workers she studied became so frustrated as targets of closure, they left the US-based project they had been working on. In our case, Danish employees’ acts of closure were aimed at maintaining tasks and traditional work practices, rather than completely shutting out the Filipino employees. We also observed more typical acts of closure at GlobalSoft, but they seemed less pervasive than what Metiu reported. But they did occur. For example, at one point during a video meeting, we observed workers in the Philippines who were surprised to learn that they would continue their work with a new version of a product.

*Filipino employee (with disbelief): There is a new version of [the product]?*

*Danish worker: Yes, there will be one in the future.*

*Second Filipino employee: We did actually not know that we could expect a new version of [the product]. I have to pull some strings to get the same developers back to [the project].*

The Philippine office was yet again being left out of loop regarding essential information. Metiu observed that such actions are exacerbated by historical and economic status differences, as well as geographic distance which “lowers the costs of exclusion” (Metiu 2006). In a face-to-face interaction, an act that would be grounds for embarrassment (such as not answering a question posed by a colleague, failing to read a document sent several days previously, or withholding information about project scheduling) becomes less problematic in a mediated environment.

Our research shows an asymmetric relation in acts of closure centered in notions of culture. Danish and Filipino workers in the same department at GlobalSoft behaved differently. By contrast, other studies point to reciprocal constructions of cultural difference. Marrewijk found that Dutch and Indian employees simultaneously constructed cultural differences to strategically improve their relative power in their organizations (Marrewijk 2010). Indian workers cultivated an image of cultural adeptness at avoiding conflict and disharmony to legitimize the idea that they should have more contact with clients. Dutch employees portrayed themselves as more punctual, indicating that they should remain in control of planning and leading projects (Marrewijk 2010). In our case, the rhetoric of culture had implications for the use of technology. For instance, Filipino workers engaged in instant messaging conversations with co-workers located right next to them, and preferred IM because conversations could be archived and interruptions reduced. IM conversations between Denmark and the Philippines happened much less. Danish employees were less inclined to choose synchronous modes of mediated communication with Filipino employees because of unease with English, but also due to a presumed cultural “barrier” in which they saw not sharing the “same logical background” as another impediment to understanding in mediated conversation. Acts of closure were easier to execute with the use of asynchronous communication tools such as the requirements specification documents, email, and instant messaging. However, videoconferencing seemed to work in the opposite direction because it required participants to explicitly commit to the collaboration. Media choice can thus help managers contend with closure although of course it does not solve all the problems. More importantly, understanding broad processes such as closure can aid managers in interpreting employees’ media choices and addressing root causes of collaboration problems. Our contribution adds to the growing body of literature that critically investigates cultural explanations in offshoring work (Marrewijk 2010, Boden 2012). Each of these studies offers similar but slightly different problems with cultural explanations. We propose that in construing national culture as a stable, persistent condition, options for negotiation and discussion which might have brought the Danish and Filipino employees into a state of more equitable relations, were foreclosed, and static relations tended to persist. We suggest that teams involved in global software development should openly acknowledge the risk of closure strategies to strengthen the use of synchronous mediated communication such as video conferences, which promoted collaboration through the necessity of commitment.

Offshoring software development tasks is a key means by which today’s corporations strive to stay competitive. Offshoring will continue to increase in the future, and internal competition over assignments in cross-national groups is likely right from the beginning of such projects. As one Filipino employee said: “*You get that feeling that everyone is competing to get that next big project.*” Success and failure were important themes in Globalsoft discourse. Marrewijk argues that in global software teams, one group may actually benefit from failures in the collaboration (Marrewijk 2010). A “paradox of success” arises in which successful offshore projects eventually shift the balance of power toward the offshoring group, leaving the onshore group at a disadvantage. Successful projects will instigate more offshoring because of the logic of cost reduction. But this shift is a loss for the onshore group, potentially leading to the relocation of work and skilled jobs to offshore locations. Failures of collaboration in which the offshore employees are blamed for problems may thus benefit onshore employees. The Danish managers in our study said that the growth of the offshore group was “organic,” suggesting that, as Marrewijk argued, successful offshore projects eventually beget more offshore projects. Danish employees worried about what this trend would mean for their future.

Danish employees shared their uncertainties about future employment and fear of losing control. Such problems have been documented in other studies of global software development (see Oza and Hall 2005). In a sense, offshoring is something of a “zero-sum game,” in which one group gains at the expense of the other. Zimmermann found that German developers were “seen to actively seek evidence for Indian mistakes in order to argue against the transfer [of tasks]” (2012). In our study, gains for Danish employees would similarly result from perceived lower quality offshore work since more work would then be conducted in Denmark. This was precisely what happened when Danish

employees pulled back 50% of a project intended to go the Philippines, putatively because they could not rely on the Philippine office to do the job correctly. The long-term gains of remaining competitive in the market may not hold much sway with employees who must deal with day-to-day uncertainties, frustrations, and fears. Short-term benefits legitimize closure to preserve opportunities and resources for employees in the Danish office (see also Metiu 2006).

Danish workers' discourse indicated that culture is stable, habitual, historical, ordinary, primal. They described themselves as "Scandinavian," suggesting a historical cultural realm even beyond Denmark. They spoke of culture in powerful exclusionary metaphors such as "borders" and "barriers." Filipino workers were also aware of culture though they did not construct notions of culture to exclude Danish employees. Enacting closure would have worked against their goals of solving daily problems which enabled them to be more valued global workers. Describing difficulties as tractable problems such as document production, rather than problems caused by an immutable characteristic, positioned them to actively explore solutions. Consonant with the logic of flexible problem solution, we observed that Filipino workers used culture as a relatively flexible construct in which variation was possible, and in which a person could even go against prevailing cultural norms and choose the cultural traits he or she wanted. In an interview, a Filipino manager who had just described her culture as "polite," then excluded herself from this categorization, saying: "*So, [the norm] comes out as being polite, or as not being able to say no. I'm probably more tactless. (Laughs.)*" The manager acknowledged the cultural norm in the Philippines, but at the same time, said that it did not apply to her. She was "tactless," and this did not concern her. The manager continued, saying:

*We're very hierarchical. You will see some people who still call me Ma'am or Miss. I mean, I call [the general manager by his name]. Not like, I'm not about to call him sir. But sometimes I tease him and call him boss. But, you know, that's more like a joke.*

An individual could play with cultural norms, even joking with a superior, in a culture of hierarchy. We noticed that Filipino workers told stories about playing around with culture while Danish workers did not. For example, a Filipino employee remarked in an interview: "*For me, I don't see there is a problem. Maybe because I am less offended, so I guess it depends on the person.*" The nuanced way in which Filipino employees addressed the collaborative challenges at GlobalSoft (such as becoming "tactless" to be a better manager or "less offended" to be a good worker), seems to underscore the "professionalism in a global context" Filipino workers valued, in contrast to Danish workers who ascribed the challenges of collaboration to static cultural differences.

Identifying "cross-national" problems focuses the analysis more precisely on the particular cultures and organizations under study. The term "global," while useful, is less precise, and effaces particular historical and sociotechnical conditions which should be taken into account in understanding closure. Socio-political motives such as resistance to change impeded use of communication technologies for purposes of cross-national collaboration not because of faults in the design of the technologies, but because of a pattern of acts of closure (see also Meissonier and House, 2010). Danish workers often invoked culture as the root of problems of collaboration, but when questioned in interviews, they sometimes gave vague answers about what they meant, or retrenched to culture as merely language. Sometimes they were firm about specific cultural differences such as one employee who said: "*[Filipino workers] share a cultural characteristic where you do what you are told and do not ask questions unlike how we do it here in Denmark.*" Ybema and Byun observed: "Within the politicized context of a multinational corporation, organizational actors may play up or play down, praise or dispraise, or even ignore or invent culture and cultural differences." (Ybema and Byun 2009). The asymmetry of the uses of culture at GlobalSoft exemplifies Ybema and Byun's characterization of the flexible dynamics of cross-national collaboration. Asymmetry in closure may appear when national groups working together have differing interests and concerns. Marrewijk commented that "[Managers] should learn to understand how their own behavior is interpreted by the 'other', given (a)symmetric power relations" (Marrewijk 2010). In our study, we saw only Danish employees

construct a cultural “other,” while Filipino employees spoke of problems of coordination, communication, and professionalism in their efforts to manage collaboration.

## 5 Conclusion

In our study we found that employees in Denmark invoked the rhetoric of culture in an attempt to maintain power and influence with respect to their work practices, while Filipino employees resisted cultural explanations, providing other causal explanations. Closure occurred in response to new conditions of work and uncertainties and concerns generated by offshoring. In construing national culture as a stable, persistent condition, options for negotiation and discussion which might have brought the Danish and Filipino employees into a state of more equitable relations, were foreclosed, and static relations tended to persist. Closure affected media choices and patterns of everyday communication. In particular, we observed how modes of asynchronous mediated communication enabled acts of closure through the rhetoric of culture, whereas video conferences seemed to promote collaboration through the necessity of commitment, and possibly through the face to face nature of videoconferencing, a topic that requires further study. Teams involved in GSD should openly acknowledge the risk of closure strategies. It would be useful to establish a critical approach to cultural explanations and question them whenever possible. The rhetorical use of closure is disabling for finding constructive solutions to challenges, and practitioners should strive to look beyond “typical” cultural explanations.

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