

You say tick, I say tock

Andries du Plessis and Fred Venter find cultural differences about time management in developing countries can be problematic but, when approached sensitively, can yield significant improvements in both work processes and outputs, particularly in developing countries.

In the African language of Schambala, there are no words for past or future. There is only *today* and *not today*. In the English language, time *flies*; in Spanish it *walks*. British politicians *stand* for office, but Americans *run*. In other words, the notion of time and time management differs across the cultural divide. A captain of the French Foreign Legion, when faced with significant problems, was known to pair a northern European (German) with a southern European (French or Italian). The south

delaying a purchase because of uncertainty about how to get product information.

Economic and social change is usually measured in terms of years, decades, or centuries, while geological change is measured in millions of years, and cosmological change in billions. Humans see the heavens and earth as fixed and unchanging because their senses cannot see any changes, but change is a constant. Linear time flows in a straight line from past to present to future. Clock time is time measured in

flies = walks

European would lead the brainstorming session and the north European would lead the implementation, thus making use of the southern European's theoretical bent with the northern Europeans attention to detail. Western culture – which considers time as linear – prefers monochronic behaviour, while Eastern cultures favour polychronicity and multi-tasking.

In the US, people feel they have less free time than they did 10 years ago, which has led to increased stress and a growing emphasis on conveniences. This has also led to people not buying things, or at least

hours, minutes and seconds. It is how people organise their lives. Assembly line workers tend to operate in cyclical time, where time is viewed in repeated events at regular, predictable intervals. Management, on the other hand, operates according to linear time, where the clock dictates.

Different cultures have different perceptions of time and value different aspects of it. Some have more concern for time past, time present or future time. Whatever the perception, such cultural differences can be problematic. However, if these differ-

ences are approached sensitively, they can yield significant improvements in both work processes and outputs, particularly in developing countries.

This study aimed to investigate cultural differences in the perceptions of time and time management and the implications of these for productivity among socio-demographic groups in Gauteng, South Africa. In the African context, time perception can be strongly influenced by culture. Se-Sotho-speaking South Africans

run=stand

have a past, an ancestral and a present-oriented time perspective, a pattern referred to as 'Afrocentric'.

English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, on the other hand, have a more Eurocentric culture that tends towards individualism and materialism, with a future-oriented time perspective. Time Structure Questionnaire, the measuring instrument developed by Bond and Feather, was extended to measure the following six dimensions of time: sense of purpose; effective organisation (how well respondents plan their time); structured routine (how activities come together during the day); present orientation (completion of the task at a certain point); persistence and time perception.

linear=lateral

The questionnaire concluded with measures of several demographic variables, namely home language, age, gender, education, religion and household income per month.

Overall, the results indicated that respondents' perceptions of time are related to socio-demographic variables. Sense of purpose and persistence were the most influential of these variables, suggesting that most respondents felt that they spent their time usefully and meaningfully and were completion-oriented. On the other hand, present orientation produced the lowest mean score. The study found there were links between home language and structured routine; gender and sense of purpose; education and sense of purpose; and age and persistence. Income influenced all factors.

Home language: The majority of respondents spoke English (41 per cent), followed by Afrikaans (27 per cent) and Se-Sotho (18 per cent). In relation to structured routine, the English group had significantly higher scores on average than the Se-Sotho group.

Gender: There were more female (57 per cent) than male (43 per cent) respondents in the sample. The only significant difference was with respect to sense of purpose, where the males obtained a higher score.

Education: The largest proportion of respondents (73 per cent) indicated that they had undertaken tertiary education. These respondents had a significantly higher score for sense of purpose compared with those without a tertiary education.

Age: It was found that as respondents grow older, they become more effective in managing their time by following a structured routine and focusing on completing a task at a certain point in time.

Income: Respondents were predominantly in the upper income category and this group regarded themselves as more competent in their perception of time and management.

In conclusion, instructors should be sensitive to cultural differences in time perception when introducing time-management programs, with language and religion being very important factors to consider. The five time-perception dimensions identified in this study

may further serve as guidelines for key focus areas in time-management programs. The need to 'work smarter not harder' is an important area to focus on, given the increased pressures in the workplace, where 'more has to be done and it has to be done now!' An important factor in achieving this is the ability of an individual to manage their time effectively.

Dr Andries du Plessis is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Management and Entrepreneurship, Unitec, New Zealand and **Fred Venter** is Professor in human resource management, Department of Management, NorthWest University, Vaal Triangle Campus, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa.

MBR subscribers: to view full academic paper, email mbr@buseco.monash.edu.au

Public access: www.mbr.monash.edu/full-papers.php (six month embargo applies)