Cultural differences in managerial aspirations of ICT professionals

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ABSTRACT

The ICT industry has brought about tremendous changes in all sectors of life. The rate at which both hardware and software have been adopted has led to a constant need of qualified personnel. According to some recent studies managerial positions are not considered as one of the top career goals for young ICT professionals. In Finland, becoming a manager or leader was ranked only the sixth important career goal for young ICT professionals (Universum 2010). Here the question arises to which extent national cultures differ in their approach to managerial aspirations by applying the example of Finland and Austria.

In this exploratory study a qualitative approach is used to assess differences in managerial aspirations of UAS Master`s ICT students. Using the framework for categorizing cultural differences from the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study, potential Finnish and Austrian managers are examined by individual cultural dimensions. Taking the GLOBE dimensions performance orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism influenced by Hofstede`s (1980) MAS index we delineate the dimensions that impacted career aspirations most. A hypothesis was set up after evaluating the qualitative data. In a second study the predicted hypotheses will be analyzed and verified with quantitative research.

Keywords: cultural differences; ICT; managerial aspirations, management

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1   INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore possible cultural differences in managerial aspirations between Austrian and Finnish master's students of University of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Information & Communication Technology (ICT) study programmes. According to some recent discussions (e.g. Vesterinen & Suutarinen 2011) and Helsingin Sanomat (2011) the motivation of Finnish young professionals to pursue managerial positions has diminished and only few young junior jobseekers stated the objective of obtaining a managerial position as their main career goal. It has been noted that young professionals in Finland rather prefer flexibility and value free time more to having a powerful position in their professional lives.

As information communication technology and systems have become integrated into more core business functions, there is a consequent growth and complexity of attracting, retaining and managing skilled information systems personnel to accomplish this function. Lack of ICT skills and business skills are widespread impediments to effective uptake once adoption decisions are made. (OECD, 2004). Currently, global trends in the demand for information systems personnel with proficient qualifications have led to a shortage of this valuable human resource (see Niederman & Ferratt 2006). However, there has, as yet, been no empirical work that quantifies explicitly the extent to which career prospects of ICT graduates determine their professional development in terms of managerial aspirations.

Cultural values can be seen as building blocks for behavior and action (de Vries 2001). As such, they have considerable impact on both managerial aspirations and leadership practices. In the perception that Austrian culture ranks higher in masculinity, assertiveness and performance orientation – dimensions supporting managerial aspirations (e.g. Hofstede 2005, the GLOBE Research Program 2004) – the researchers started to wonder whether the career aspirations of Austrian young professionals would differ in respect to managerial goals of Finnish master's degree students. Drawing on the example of master`s degree students in both countries, the present paper seeks to investigate the possible relationship between the managerial aspirations and cultural dimension supporting them.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research was carried out as an exploratory study to gain some insight for a later and more extensive quantitative study. With this small-scale quantitative research the authors wanted to test the working hypothesis that Austrian ICT master's students are more inclined to pursue managerial careers than Finns.

2.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main research objective of this paper is to explore cultural differences in managerial aspirations of Austrian and Finnish ICT students taking a master`s degree at a University of Applied Sciences.

Based on the main question the researchers aimed at finding answers to the following sub-questions:

a) Why are ICT students taking a master`s degree majoring in business administration (ICT)?

b) Do the results of this study reflect the findings of both the Hofstede (masculinity index) and the GLOBE Study (cultural dimensions performance orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism)?

c) Which characteristics are considered to be substantial for a manager in the ICT sector?

d) Are there any cultural differences in both the perception and pursuit of career between Austria and Finland?

2.2 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

A brief examination of the key concepts is undertaken before presenting the methodology, key findings and conclusions. The major constructs of interest of this exploratory study are culture, the ICT industry, managerial aspirations and cultural values affecting these aspirations.

There is no universally agreed definition for the concept of *culture* (Chhokar & al. 2007, 3). Hall (1997) defined culture as arbitrary lines between acceptable and unacceptable. Hofstede (2005) uses the analogy of computers and sees culture as mental programming where patterns such as thinking, feeling and acting are mental programs like software for computers. Spencer-Oatey (2005) brings in the aspect of culture influencing the interpretation of behavior of other people and meanings of communication acts. The common approach of all definitions is that culture is regarded as a hidden force influencing and driving most of the human behavior. The hypothesis of this study anticipates that culture might also be a driving force for managerial aspirations of young professionals working or aiming to work in the ICT field.

The term *information communication technology (ICT)* is often used as a synonym for information technology (IT). ICT, however, describes a wider concept including a variety of fields dealing with computers to tackle issues, such as hardware or software engineering, information systems, telecommunications, information security or information networks. The students interviewed for this study take a master`s degree in Information Engineering and Management (Austria) and Information Systems (Finland), covering a broad range within the ICT industry.

The concept of *management* was not rigorously predefined at the beginning of this study. Both writers of this paper understood management as a non-entry level position comprising planning, process, budgetary and personnel responsibilities. The interviewees were given the freedom to further define their understanding of management and managerial responsibility.

2.3 MATERIAL GATHERING AND ANALYZING

The main form of data collection comprised semi-structured interviews conducted with master ICT students in Austria and Finland. The sample was designed to achieve both Austrian and Finnish participants with at least 3 years of work experience. The second requirement was to select an age group of around thirty.

In order to investigate the factors that influenced ICT graduates to either take up or refrain from a managerial position it was vital to have a range of questions relating to characteristics associated with good managerial characteristics and identify them for both Austrian and Finnish students. The characteristics were selected from the GLOBE dimensions assertiveness, performance orientation and gender egalitarianism. Each participant provided information regarding their personal assessment. This allowed a variety of cultural issues to be explored within the context of management. The concern of the research was to gather interviewee variety to support the quality of data and thus both male and female candidates were interviewed.

Adopting a semi-structured questionnaire allowed a high degree of flexibility during the interviews and a more natural bidirectional communication was used to gain in-depth understanding of the research questions. To ensure validation of the findings the questionnaire was initially piloted. Using interviews enabled the authors to elaborate on unclear points and to explore the extent of the answers.

Ten interviews were conducted with young professionals taking a master`s degree majoring in business administration (ICT) in Austria (5) and Finland (5) during January and February 2012. The duration of the interviews varied between 15 to 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and paraphrased and then analyzed through the use of qualitative analysis by theming. During the analysis extensive and broad patterns were looked for.

3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in the original masculinity index proposed by G. Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE Study (2004). The dimensions of performance orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism were chosen as close and more recently tested attributes to the MAS index and are briefly introduced below. In order to keep this study focused other cultural dimensions were not included in this illustrative review.

3.1   CULTURAL DIMENSIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS

Cultures and cultural patterns can be described and measured along cultural dimensions or typologies as defined among many other researchers, e.g. Hall (1990, 2000), Hofstede (1980, 1993, 2001), the GLOBE Study (2004), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Schwarz (1992, 1999), Trompenaars and Woolliams (2003) or Turner (1997).

All these cultural models have taken a cross-cultural perspective where certain values or behaviors are found to be generally typical of certain groups of people. Individual variations are of minor importance in cross-cultural research.

3.2   CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AFFECTING CAREER ASPIRATIONS

The extensive use of Geert Hofstede`s set of cultural dimensions over the last 30 years in both empirical and theoretical research allows it to be considered as a grounded approach to describe cultural behavior as in this paper. Hofstede's masculinity index reflects to what extent a culture is influenced by masculine values such as achievement orientation, competition, independence and career. Hofstede (2005, 115-119) claims that masculinity implies dominant features in a society that emphasize assertiveness, acquisition of money and material objects whereas feminine cultures appreciate values such as quality of life, fairness and care for the weak. The lower the masculinity index, the more a culture is dominated by feminine behavior. Feminine societies put their focus on a supportive climate, on discretion, modesty, tolerance, solidarity, low conflict, trust and socio-emotional support. (Hofstede 2005; Nakata and Sivakumar 1996).

As shown in figure 1, Austria scores much higher in masculinity (MAS index score 79, rank 4) than Finland (score 26, rank 68) (Hofstede 2005, 120-121). These figures would therefore support the hypothesis that Austrian ICT students would be more inclined to strive for managerial positions than their Finnish counterparts.

Figure 1: Scores for Hofstede's dimensions for Austria and Finland (Source: www.geert-hofstede.com)
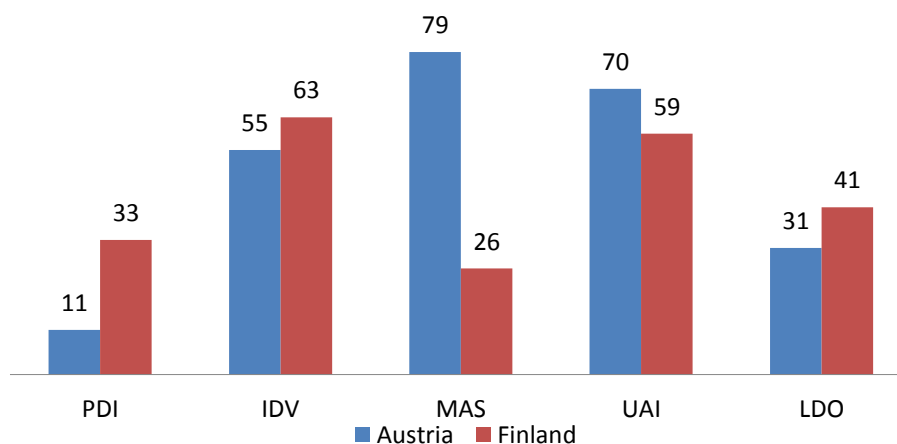
The GLOBE research (acronym for Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) exceeds in scope, depth and duration most other cross-cultural comparisons (Grove 2005) including the Hofstede study. GLOBE researchers collected data from approximately 17 300 managers in 951 organizations in 62 world cultures around the millennium change (House & al. 2004) and investigated the relationships between societal cultures, organizational cultures and leadership practices in the initial quantitative research. In 2007, Chhokar & al. focused on 25 of the GLOBE Study countries with an in-depth qualitative study. As a more recent and even wider approach the GLOBE Study was a grounded choice to complement the Hofstede theory and to tackle the research questions of this paper.

The comparative societal culture research conducted by GLOBE is based on nine carefully selected cultural dimensions after reviewing the most relevant cross-cultural literature. These include Hofstede, Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, McClelland and Putman among others. (Chhokar et al. 2007, 3.) For this paper, dimensions mainly supporting managerial aspirations were examined, namely the dimensions of assertiveness, gender egalitarianism and performance orientation. These dimensions together with Hofstede's masculinity index served as a basis for the interview questions.

In the GLOBE research, Hofstede's masculinity index was extended to assertiveness and gender egalitarianism because these two dimensions better represent the theoretical construct of masculinity and avoid the confusion and interpretation difficulties of the gender equality issue of Hofstede's masculinity index (Chhokar & al. 2007, 82). Assertiveness stands for assertive, confrontational and aggressive behavior in social relationships. Assertiveness is often considered as a contributing characteristic for managers (House & al. 2004, 345). Gender egalitarianism is the extent to which an organization or a society minimizes gender role differences while promoting gender equality. Several studies (see House et. al 2004, 345) have confirmed that males rank higher in assertive behavior and that this behavioral pattern has been exposed in several cultures. Performance orientation indicates how highly organizations or societies encourage or reward for performance improvement and excellence (House& al. 2004, 239-241). As performance orientation includes many attributes valued for managers, such as progress, success, work, courage, it was chosen for one comparative dimension in this study.

The cultural dimensions studied in the GLOBE Study were depicted as a continuum between two extreme poles on a seven step (1-7) rating scale. Both the "as is" situation – behaviors, practices and prescriptions as they are interpreted by the members in a culture – and the "should be" values were questioned from the middle managers. As indicated in table 1, there are some notable differences in assertiveness and performance orientation scores "as is" between Austria and Finland whereas the difference in gender egalitarianism is relatively small.

Table 1. GLOBE dimensions of societal culture "as is" and "should be" for Austria and Finland
(Source: Chhokar & al. 2007, 84; 121)

Societal Culture	As is				Should be			
	Score		Rank		Score		Rank	
Dimensions	AT	FIN	AT	FIN	AT	FIN	AT	FIN
Gender Egalitarianism	3.09	3.35	45	31	4.83	4.24	18	45
Assertiveness	4.62	3.81	6	47	2.81	3.68	60	35
Performance Orientation	4.44	3.81	14	46	6,10	6,11	21	20

Gender Egalitarianism
In gender egalitarianism Austria ranks in "as is" on place 45 which displays a wide difference between the "as is" (score 3.09) and "should be" (score 4.83, rank 18) data. Chhokar & al. (2007, 125) believe that this derives from "much *talk* about the equal chances for women in Austria but the reality often shows a different picture."

In this dimension Finland is situated in the middle of the GLOBE countries ('as is' rank 31, score 3.35). Even though the number of working women is relatively high - 66 % of women and 68, 1 % of men are employed (OFS 2011a) - the female earnings still lag behind representing about 82 % of the male earnings (Miehet ja naiset Suomessa 2011). Ideally, as shown in the "should be" responses, the Finnish society would require a higher feminine input ("should be" rank 45, score 4.42).

Assertiveness

The major differences between Austria and Finland lie in the assertiveness dimension. Assertiveness was also part of Hofstede's masculinity index where Austria ranked on the top. The same goes for GLOBE Study where Austrians rank relatively highly (score 4.62, rank 6). There is, however, a big difference with regard to the "should be" ranking (score 2.81, rank 60). Chhokar & al. anticipate (2007, 127) that this gap might be due to a trend toward a more egalitarian society.

Finns, on the other hand, show rather non-dominant and non-aggressive behavior in their social relationships. The "as is" situation on assertiveness ranks 47 with a score 3.81. The "should be" scores hint only to minor changes toward less dominance and aggressiveness (score 3.68, rank 35) (Chhokar & al. 2007, 86.).

Performance orientation

Austrian middle managers interviewed in the GLOBE Study II (in-depth qualitative research on selected 25 societies) show also a high level of performance orientation. The "as is" scores 4.44 and ranks 14. There is a wish towards even higher scoring (6.10, rank 21) which is, according to Chhokar et al. (2007, 127) a small surprise as other studies have not reported similarly high levels of performance orientation.

Finns show an even stronger desire towards more achievement and performance: the "as is" scores 3.81 (rank 46) but the desired state would be 6.11 (rank 20). Chhokar et al. (2007, 84) explain the current low level that despite emphasis on results in business, there are many counteracting factors at the society level, such as a re-distributive taxation system and high rates of taxes.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Key dimensions of cultural differences of the GLOBE Study drawn from participants in Austria and Finland were used to collate the major attributes accountable for managerial aspirations. The reported results reflect findings based on the ten interviews. The questions and results are presented in the subchapters below.

What is the primary motivation for ICT students to take a Master`s degree majoring in business administration (ICT)?

The main drive for Austrian ICT students is to earn a master`s degree enabling them to pursue their professional career. Academic titles are considered to be most important to convey a proficient picture in terms of social recognition representing a pre-requisite to climb the career ladder. Career is associated with both personnel management and responsibility. Austrian ICT students are eager to assume responsibility which should result in a managerial position in the long run.

The motivations of Finnish ICT students are only indirectly related to their actual career goals. The main motivations mentioned by Finns referred more to professional self-development and to reasons emerging from private life (to be on equal stands with wife already being awarded a master's degree; having the opportunity to use the free time during maternity leave; being able to get a student allowance and stay home with the child).

These answers show some clear cultural differences in managerial aspirations of Austrian and Finnish ICT master`s degree students as anticipated in the main hypothesis of this study.

Which career goals are pursued?

For Austrians it was vital to have a challenging position and to be entrusted with responsibility. The concept of responsibility played a major role in their perception of career. The more responsibility assumed, the more they felt respected and valuable for the company. To get the job done proficiently was a further main factor in their career definition.

The Finns mentioned similar goals but once more emphasized personal self-development and self-gratification. A challenging job was used as a synonym for having fun at work. Two Finnish respondents also mentioned about dreaming of setting up their own business.

How is career defined and which cultural differences were observed?

In Austria career was clearly linked with holding a senior position, mainly in top management. As a result, all Austrian participants indicated that making a career corresponds to working at a C-level management position (such as Chief Executive or Chief Information Officer). Austrian participants further asserted that career is associated with challenging tasks that are carried out proficiently.

In Finland, none of the respondents mentions senior level positions as part of their career aspirations. The career definition reflected their wish for self-development or just getting forward (avoiding a boring and non-challenging position). It was also mentioned that "changing jobs can be done also horizontally, not just vertically". The researchers identified a major difference in the perception of the concept of manager. Whereas Austrians defined managers as people working in a top-level position with leadership skills, the Finnish interviewees focused more on managerial processes and workflows.

What are the major aspects of professional life?

The interviewees were asked to rank the aspects below according to the importance allocated to their professional life on a 1 to 6 scale with 6 being the highest. Table 2 below shows the mean score of the answers given.

For Austrians quality of life and self-fulfillment played a major role in their professional lives whereas power and a secure workplace were ranked the lowest. Both social recognition and financial incentives were considered to be more crucial for Austrians than for Finnish interviewees.

Finns ranked the quality of life equally at highest position but also indicated that a secure workplace is very important for them. For Finns this comes as no surprise as they are ranked quite highly (8) also in the uncertainty avoidance dimension in the GLOBE Study. The Austrians, however, rank even higher (6) in this GLOBE dimension but in this small study it did not seem to be a very relevant issue for the respondents.

Table 2. Most important factors of work-life

	AUSTRIA	FINLAND
Quality of life	5,4	5
Self-fulfillment	4,8	4
Social recognition	3,8	3,4
Financial incentive	3,2	2,4
Secure workplace	2,8	5
Power	1	1,6

What characteristics play a crucial role in private life?

All participants in this study were asked to rank six features for both their private and professional lives. The Austrian interviewees made a clear distinction between major factors that play a crucial role in their private and professional lives. Given the fact that the most pronounced cultural value of the Germanic cluster is performance orientation along with low levels of humane orientation (see Brodbeck et al, 2002) it was surprising that these factors were reversed in private life.

For Finns, the most prominent factor in private life was fairness. This is well supported by the fact that Finns value institutional collectivism highly (Chhokar & al. 2007, 87), that is how societal practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action. The interviewees were asked to rank the aspects below according to the importance allocated to private life on a 1 to 6 scale with 6 being the highest. Table 2 below shows the mean score of the answers given.

Table 3. Most important factors in private life.

	AUSTRIA	FINLAND
Humane-oriented	5,6	4,8
Fair	4,2	6
Consensus-oriented	3,8	3,8
Performance-oriented	3,2	1,6
Decisive	3	2,8
Competitive	1,2	1,4

What characteristics play a crucial role in professional life?

Austrian participants acknowledged that the same factors had a substantially different weighting in professional life. This conception might be predominant due to the German separation of personality and living spheres (see Schroll-Machl, 2003).

Finnish participants indicated a fairly similar ranking order to the answers given in private and professional ranking. It seems likely that mixing and integrating personal and professional lives is quite common for Finns, as also indicated by the first question about the main motivations for master's degree studies.

Performance orientation figures for Austrians and Finns show the most striking differences where Austria scores the double indicating some support for the working hypothesis of this study. In humane orientation, however, the Austrian answers rank significantly lower than the ones given by Finns.

In table 4 the interviewees were asked to rank the aspects below according to the importance allocated to their professional life on a 1 to 6 scale with 6 being the highest. Table 4 below shows the mean score of the answers given.

Table 4. Most important factors in professional life.

	AUSTRIA	FINLAND
Fair	5,6	5,8
Performance-oriented	4,2	1,6
Decisive	4	3,8
Consensus-oriented	3,8	2,8
Humane-oriented	3,6	5,2
Competitive	1,2	1,4

What key characteristics are required for pursuing a career in the ICT-industry?

All of the Austrian participants of this study could identify with self-confidence and assertiveness as a key element for success. They claimed that: "One has to be clear about the management approach"; "It is vital to be self-confident and put corporate needs before personal agendas". Several participants noted that senior managers would not be successful if they were too cooperative. Most Austrian interviewees stated that when it comes to modesty there is no place for such a virtue in professional life, particularly as to managerial aspirations.

Finnish participants ranked cooperative features clearly higher than Austrian respondents. Another high rank was given to assertiveness, which was only modestly higher than the score of the Austrian students. The interviewees were asked to rank the aspects below according to the importance allocated to major characteristics of an IT manager on a 1 to 6 scale with 6 being the highest. Table 5 below shows the mean score of the answers given.

Table 5. Most important characteristics of an IT manager

	AUSTRIA	FINLAND
Self-confidence	5	3,6
Assertiveness	4,4	5,2
Value-orientation	4,2	4,8
Competition	3,6	2,2
Cooperation	2,8	5,2
Modesty	1	1,8

How do you feel about women in executive positions?

Hofstede's masculinity index encompassed at least two distinct aspects of societal culture. The masculinity aspect reflecting assertiveness, toughness, competition in societies has already been included in the previous questions. The second aspect of masculinity and femininity reflects differences among societies in their beliefs about behavior that is appropriate for males versus females (House & al. 344). For this reason, this study further included a question about different standpoints towards the gender of a manager.

The consensus in Austria was that males still take a dominant role in leading positions and that despite the efforts taken by Austrian government this tendency will go on in the near future. Several participants claimed that women are still the weaker sex and therefore considered not being assertive and competitive enough to take on a leading role. Women were also found to lack ruthlessness and less career-oriented than men.

Finns, on the other hand, related positively or neutrally to this question. All the respondents mentioned that the gender of the superior does not have any significance. They also indicated that the number of women in leading positions still lag behind the male percentage, stressing that this hold true for the ICT sector even more substantially than in general management positions. Most Finnish respondents, however, felt that the number of females in leading positions is on the rise.

5 LIMITATIONS

As to the limitations of this exploratory study it should be stressed that although for the relevant GLOBE variables used in this paper a hypothesis was set up and conclusions can be drawn, the findings are applicable for restricted regions only and the hypotheses have to be verified in an additional paper. Whether the analyzed GLOBE variables derived partially from the masculinity index and findings regarding managerial aspirations can apply to a wider range of countries, is also subject to further research. Second, in this study we focused only on a restricted scope of cultural variables but it can be assumed that other cultural dimensions also have an impact on managerial aspirations of master's degree ICT students.

A balanced distribution of the gender of the respondents was not taken into account as the number of the respondents was relatively small. It is possible that the gender of the respondents has significant impact on the outcome. Three of the Finnish and one of the Austrian respondents were female. The relationship between managerial aspiration and culture serves as an interesting subject for future studies.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study was conducted to find further indications supporting the relationship between a set of cultural variables and certain career anchors.

This study has explored the managerial aspirations of five Austrian and five Finnish ICT students taking a master`s degree majoring in business administration (ICT) with regards to three cultural variables investigated by GLOBE. The research has highlighted a number of cultural differences in their career approach resulting in the following hypothesis: There is a positive relationship with masculinity and managerial aspirations.

This hypothesis will be verified in an additional paper by means of a quantitative research.

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