Frames of Reference

Case Study of Cross-Cultural Communication between Canada and Japan

Dissertation for the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy to attain the degree of subsequent master in Multilingual Business Communication by Kim Merckaert

Supervisor UGent: Prof. Dr. G. Jacobs
Supervisor HumanWare: Stéphan Lessard
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We tend to have a human instinct that 'deep inside' all people are the same - but they are not. Therefore, if we go into another country and make decisions based on how we operate in our own home country - the chances are we'll make some very bad decisions.*

—Geert Hofstede

# TABLE WITH DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERNSHIP

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| HumanWare           | Stéphan Lessard | Marketing| - Ontwikkeling Japanse markt
- Public Relations
- Externe communicatie
- Opstellen van campagneplan | Engels, Frans, Japans | 17/05/2010 - 06/08/2010 |
| 445, Parc-Industriel |
| Longueuil, Québec   |
| Canada J4H 3V7      |
| +1 450 463 1717     |
This dissertation crowns the end of an intensive year of study and a three-month foreign internship. Without the help of several individuals, these experiences would not have been possible. I therefore wish to express my gratitude towards the following persons.

To HumanWare and all its employees, thank you for giving me the chance to experience the past few months. Your guidance, kindness and support have provided me with valuable insight, an interesting experience, and all the information I required for the completion of this thesis. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Stéphane Lessard and Audrey Fréchette for their guidance through my internship and for the trust they bestowed on me and my work.

I would like to thank Tom Bruyer, who has filled the big shoes of Luc de Bie outstandingly and to all of the MBC professors and lecturers for providing me with various new viewpoints on business and communication matters.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Cullen family, who housed me and cared for me as one of their own during my stay in Canada.
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INTRODUCTION

Upon completing my Master’s degree in *East-Asian Cultures and Languages*, I looked to combine my knowledge with something more practical. Thus, I decided to branch in business communication and was accepted in two post-graduate programs: MBC and management & communication. Although both seemed compelling, I picked MBC over management & communication due to the fact the MBC program integrated an internship in its curriculum. During the course of the last year, I have been challenged with unfamiliar tasks and situations; experienced some of the more stressful moments in my life up to now; but enjoyed every minute of it.

My internship took place in Montreal, Canada, in a company called HumanWare. I chose HumanWare for two main reasons. In my search for an internship location, I was on the lookout for both Belgian and foreign companies. My preference leaned towards a foreign company in order to have an international experience. I valued this possibility highly since I believe it would supply me both with self-enrichment and a better position on the labor market. After a friend involved with the company informed me they were looking to penetrate the Japanese market, I jumped on the opportunity and created a video-resume, which I sent to the HR department along with my curriculum vitae. This opportunity allowed me to capitalize on the knowledge I gathered in the last five years. After a very smooth phone interview, during which the main questions pertained to logistics such as visa requirements and lodging, I was welcomed in the company.

My three-month internship started on May 17th and ended on August 6th. Over the course of my internship, the most important project I was assigned to was the development of the Japanese market. I was put in charge of the nearly all the communication with Japanese business partners. For this reason, I chose to orient the following thesis on cross-cultural communication.

The dissertation is divided in four main chapters. The first chapter provides an in-depth look into HumanWare and presents information gathered both from inside and outside sources. The second chapter lodges the research project, which offers a solution destined to optimize cross-cultural business
communication. The solution is broken down in a simple three-step procedure that may be applied to any situation and which is concretely applied to my experience at HumanWare. The third part enumerates the tasks I fulfilled during my internship and the concluding chapter looks back on the experiences and lessons retained from the MBC program, internship included.

I entitled this dissertation ‘Frames of References’, referring to the different backgrounds each person has when communicating. One always uses certain benchmarks to perceive and evaluate the communication. It is my belief that these frames may lead to frictions in any kind of communication, more so during cross-cultural communication. I aim to raise the awareness of these frames and benchmarks and offer a way to reduce frictions in order to improve the flow of communication, particularly during business transactions. It is my belief that knowing, accepting and adapting one’s frame of reference leads to mutually beneficial business dealings and sustainable business relationships.
1. **COMPANY PRESENTATION: HUMANWARE GROUP**

The following section contains a detailed presentation of the HumanWare Group (*HumanWare*). A description of the company will be first followed with a brief history. The different products offered to customers will follow. The section will end with a deeper look in the industry offering product for visually impaired.

1.1. **ABOUT**

The HumanWare Group is a company which uses information technology in order to create products that aid the active participation and autonomy of people suffering from a visual impairment or learning difficulties.

The HumanWare headquarters are in Longueuil, Quebec. This location houses the marketing department and the R&D department. The CEO, the operations department and HR are in Drummondville, a city in the same province. HumanWare also has a national office in Toronto, Ontario. The company has offices in New York, Sidney and London. These mainly consist of marketing/sales departments. The VP of marketing, Ivan Lagacé, supervises them.\(^1\) The New York office is in charge of the marketing for the USA, the Sidney office attends to the sales in Oceania and Asia and the London office is in charge of the sales in the UK and mainland Europe.

Apart from that, HumanWare also has sales representatives in North and South America, Europe, Oceania and Asia.

1.2. **COMPANY STRUCTURE**

The company is divided into three branches: A corporate Branch, which consists of the president, HR and development. The second Branch is the center of conception, consisting of R&D, marketing and operations, and the third branch is the distribution center, divided into three distributive regions.

\(^1\) Ivan Lagacé was replaced by Stéphan Langevin at the end of my internship.
The CEO of the HumanWare Group is Gilles Pépin. Silvie Nadeau acts as the head of HR and Communications. They both have their office in Drummondville. The company has three vice presidents. Ivan Lagace heads Sales and Marketing\(^2\), for Research and Development is Pierre Hamel’s responsibility and Operations is lead by Richard Nadeau. Ivan and Pierre are both stationed in Longueuil; Richard works in Drummondville. During my internship at HumanWare, the company hired a new VP Marketing. Ivan remained in the company but became Vice President of Sales.

HumanWare also has three head offices outside of the country. Phil Rance is president of distribution in the US, Ron Hatthaway is in charge of distribution in Australasia and Pedro Polson is chief of distribution in Europe. Phil is located in California, Ron in Sidney and Pedro Polson in London.

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\(^2\) See footnote 1
1.3. COMPANY HISTORY

HumanWare, as it exists in its current form, was established on January 20, 2005 when Pulse Data International, a company from New-Zealand, and VisuAide, a Canadian company, merged together to create a new organization, called Group HumanWare. The merger made HumanWare the largest corporation in its sector.

1.3.1. Pulse Data International (PDI)

In 1988, PDI was founded by Russell Smith, an electronics engineer after acquiring the company ‘Wormald Sensory Aids’ (WSA); a company that focused on products for the blind. This acquisition allowed PDI to tap into WSA’s pre-existing customer base in New Zealand and Australia. In 1992, PDI opened a new office in Northamptonshire, in the UK and in 1995 an office in Concord, California followed.

Although PDI started out as a company producing defibrillators for hospitals, a strategic reorientation lead PDI to focus on the design of technological products with integrated Braille cells, voice synthesizer and automatic magnifiers. Pulse Data International manufactured the BrailleNote, the SmartView and the MyReader (See products). 95% of the goods manufactured by PDI were exported to over 30 countries worldwide.

1.3.2. VisuAide Inc

In 1986, the INLB (Institut Nazareth et Louis Braille) launched a project for the fabrication of a machine that would read print in order to enable blind people to ‘read’. This project was assigned to Gilles Pepin, a young engineer in telecommunications. With his team, Gilles created the first automated speech technique in Canada, called Iris.

In October 1988, Gilles created a Non-Profit Organization from this project, called VisuAide. The NPO produced and distributed the reading instruments in Canada and was located in Longueuil. In 1993,
VisuAide morphed into a commercial organization. This strategic change was required for the firm to make the necessary capital expenditures investments and investments in research and development to sustain its growth. In 2000, the company’s growth required the expansion to a second location. After finding suitable offices in Drummondville, Québec, the firm moved all its operations to the new location; leaving only R&D and Marketing in Longueuil. In order to be able to respond better to the needs of clients all over Canada, VisuAide opened offices in two other provinces: Ontario in 2002 and Alberta in 2006.

Apart from the Iris software, VisuAide was known for the Victor Reader and other voice synthetizing book readers. The company held an important role in the creation of DAISY, the standardized text-to-speech format used all over the world. VisuAide also developed a GPS for the visually impaired, the Trekker, and made a PDA that’s accessible to the main stream public. At the time of the merger, VisuAide exported 85% of its products to more than 25 countries.

1.3.3. HumanWare

In December 2003 Pulse Data International and VisuAide announced their intent to merge. Initially used by a North American subsidiary of PDI since 1989, the HumanWare name was chosen to designated the merged firms. Using a new name facilitated the collusion of the corporate cultures and sent a message of compassion to all stakeholders. Additionally, the name had a truly global reach. The merger was approved in June 2005. HumanWare now had offices in New-Zealand, Australia, England, the Netherlands, Canada and the US. The CEO of Pulse Data, Russel Smith, was to become the first CEO of HumanWare. However, Only two months after the merger Russel Smith and his wife died in a plane crash. Gilles Pepin was appointed interim CEO.

As of then, the company focuses on three fields: Blindness, Low Vision and Learning disabilities. HumanWare operates in three areas: The Americas, Europe and Australasia. HumanWare has over 190 employees all over the world.

4 Longueuil, located on the south-shore of Montréal, is part of the metropolitan region of Montréal.
1.4. RECENT EVENTS AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

After the death of Russel Smith, Gilles Pepin took over as the interim CEO. After six months, the board appointed Richard Mander, a New Zealander, as CEO of HumanWare. This is no coincidence, as the board wished to have the company president residing in New Zealand since the center of research and development was in New Zealand. Although the Board of Directors had resisted in the past, in 2007, the decision that some key functions would be moved to Canada is made. Following this strategic decision to bring the head office to Canada, Richard Mander resigns as he wishes to stay in New Zealand and takes on a less prominent role within the company. Gilles Pepin is once again appointed CEO of HumanWare.\(^5\)

In January 2009, HumanWare after all the key functions were moved to Canada, the defunct head office is shutdown; over 60 employees lost their jobs, some remain independent HumanWare dealers.\(^6\)

In the upcoming future, HumanWare will put more emphasis on its marketing department. The department has already been expanded with two new employees and a new VP has been put in charge. The goal of HumanWare is to expand its market share in general, starting with the USA. HumanWare wants to build up image and awareness with its Low Vision products and is working on the elaboration of a marketing plan. In this respect, HumanWare is also working on two new Low Vision products which will be launched during the course of next year.

Since all other more recent event pertain to product design, to avoid burdening the reader, additional recent events were placed in the product section (1.6).

1.5. CORPORATE IDENTITY

1.5.1. Mission Statement

HumanWare is devoted to enable an active and autonomous participation in society for the visually impaired.

\(^6\) http://www.rnzfb.org.nz/newsandevents/publications/outlookmagazine/autumnwinter2008/news (July 22)
Therefore, HumanWare commits itself to develop and offer innovative products adapted to the needs of its clientele through the intelligent use of technology.

**1.5.2. Vision**

To be acknowledged by the industry as the international leader in the domain of development and commercialization of innovative solutions which respond to the needs of people with a visual impairment.

To be acknowledged as a unique branch, close to our target group, offering quality solutions and products matched to their needs and being professional and efficient in the process.

To be acknowledged as a catalyst of technological innovations utilisable to the general public, by the transfer of competences and products developed initially for our client target group.

**1.5.3. Corporate Values**

*Customer Driven Approach*

- Each employee is respectful and sensible towards the reality of people with a visual impairment and adapts to this with concrete actions.
- Each employee is at service of the client (internal or external) and contributes to his entire satisfaction.
- Each employee contributes to the corporate image by utilizing professionalism, a impeccable behavior with the clients and his personal presentation and dress code.

*Innovation*

- The reflex of innovation is at the heart of HumanWare and is priority in all actions.
- Each employee contributes to the continuous innovation and improvement of our products, services and actions.
The Human Capital

- The competences and professionalism of our Human Resources are determinant to the success of the company. Therefore, each employee has the right to information, formation and tools necessary to insure his autonomy and professional growth.
- A stimulating pleasant and transparent working environment stimulates respect, collaboration, joint effort and balance between the professional and the personal life.

Efficiency

- Each employee is concerned about his efficiency and a healthy management is at the base of the leaders’ concerns. Profitability ensures the growth and durability of HumanWare.

1.6. PRODUCTS

The following section lists the HumanWare products explains them briefly. HumanWare produces various products and strives to improve existing products. Below will only be listed the products that are currently in the 2010 spring/summer lineup. To enhance readability, the products were categorized in three main categories: Blindness, Low Vision and Learning Disabilities. This categorization doesn’t mean they can be exclusively used by their target market. They are simply divided according to the target market HumanWare tailored the product to. For instance, products from the ‘Blindness’ category are designed for the blind, but have proved to be very useful to people with low vision and learning disabilities as well.

Because HumanWare has quite a few products, the paper will only engage in explaining the different product categories. In the second appendix, there is a more elaborate explanation per product.

1.6.1. Blindness

Blindness products are products essentially made completely blind people. These products work either with text-to-speech, reading text to the blind person, or with electronic Braille – electric pins grouped by eight going up and down to signal the alphabet.
1.6.1.1. Digital Book Players

Digital Book Players are similar to mp3 players, but instead of playing songs, they allow the reader to hear a synthetic voice reading books. Their main function is to allow text to be converted to sound. To enable such a functionality, the talking book players rely on DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System); one of VisuAide’s greatest accomplishments. DAISY allows the navigation through written material in a spoken format. HumanWare has four products of this type: The Victor Reader Stream, The Victor Reader Wave, the Victor Reader Classic X and the Victor Reader Classic X+.

1.6.1.2. Braille Products

The HumanWare Braille products are products that mechanize Braille reading. By means of a Braille display, these tools translate written text into Braille and enable blind people to read or write computerized texts. HumanWare has Braille notebooks, which allow the user to type and navigate online and Braille displays, which are usually connected to an ordinary PC in order to read documents in Braille.

1.6.1.3. Talking GPS

These are GPS systems without the use of a screen. The information is conveyed through a synthetic voice and is more elaborate than on a regular GPS. HumanWare has two products of this kind: The Trekker and the Trekker Breeze.

1.6.1.4. Deaf-Blind Communicator

The Deaf-Blind Communicator is a combination of different products in order for a deaf-blind person to be able to communicate. It works with both text to speech and a Braille display.

1.6.2. Low Vision

Contrary to popular believe, few people are completely blind. Most people with a visual impairment have a form of ‘low vision’: their vision is distorted or very limited, but they still have some sight. With the right equipment, these people can still see print and have no need for Braille. The products that are
designed for people with low vision are originally based on close-caption TV (CCTV) for partially sighted, developed by Dr. Sam Genensky. This technique allows print to be enlarged and shown onto a screen, enabling people with low vision to read the print in a more comfortable fashion. HumanWare makes both desktop and handheld electronic magnifiers. They call these types of products the ‘SmartView-Family’. HumanWare also has an auto-reader called the ‘Myreader’.

### 1.6.3. Learning Disabilities

HumanWare started making products for people with learning disabilities when they realized this target group was already using a lot of their existing products, like the Digital Book Players. The product branch ‘learning disabilities’ is thus quite recent and HumanWare has developed one product specifically for people with learning difficulties: The Classmate Reader.

### 1.7. CUSTOMER PROFILE

HumanWare has three main categories of customers. Two of those consist of individual buyers. Blind individuals and people with low vision buy HumanWare products via the HumanWare website, the customer service or the HumanWare dealerships all over the world. HumanWare has recently begun to target assisted living facilities and retirement homes. These institutions mainly buy Low Vision products to ameliorate the quality of life of their residents.

The market of Learning Disabilities mainly consists of schools and educators, who offer the classmate reader to the students attending their school. This market is almost solely confined to the US. Although HumanWare sells to customers worldwide, the major proportion of its sales come from the US and Canada. Although the products offered are expensive, they sell to all demographic layers. Many states or countries have specialized funding plans for assistive technology and many HumanWare customers make use of these services. HumanWare however does not offer in-house financing.

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7 Samuel Genensky (07/26/1927-06/26/2009) The organization founded by Dr. Samuel Genensky: http://www.cclvi.org/. This website has a personal and thorough biography.
1.8. COMPETITORS

The competition faced by HumanWare can be categorized as indirect and direct competition.⁸

1.8.1. Indirect and Direct Competition

HumanWare strives to help people with learning disabilities and visually impaired live their lives more independently. However, apart from the technical solutions offered by HumanWare and its direct competitors, other aid is available to HumanWare’s target markets.

Several organizations provide services to the blind and visually impaired. These organizations, such as CNIB in Canada or Lighthouse International in the USA, offer psychological and physical aid to people suffering from low vision or blindness. Help can go from therapy sessions on how to live with a visual impairment to workshops and in-house trainings on various methods to carry out everyday day activities. These associations do not immediately suggest their patrons to resort to technical devices, but rather give them useful tips on how to improve their life without committing substantial financial resources.

These ‘useful tips’ compete with HumanWare products, as they aim to act not only as supplementary aid to the visually impaired, but as replacements to more technological solutions. Following are some of the tips offered by indirect competitors. A very effective tip for people with low vision is to read in large print; an easy task when a computer is at hand. It is also proposed to play with the color contrasts and to mark things very clearly in an opposite color to enhance visibility. Another tip, aimed at facilitating the act of signing, is to place a template with a rectangular opening over the desired writing space.⁹ Although these low-tech solutions don’t necessarily eliminate the need for HumanWare’s product, they may delay or reduce the volume of business experienced by HumanWare.

Companies selling magnifying glasses and other day-to-day products adjusted to people with a visual impairment, such as speaking watches can also be seen as indirect competitors. Although they are not always as effective as more technological products, they are much less expensive, more accessible, offer greater mobility and easy to buy in different sizes.

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⁸ Pocket Mentor: 2010, pp. 33-34
HumanWare greatest indirect competitors are the firms who offer computer software that enlarges text and converts text-to-speech. These products cover the same needs as do the HumanWare hardware. This market overlap was partially addressed through a partnership with Ai Squared; a firm that created the software ‘ZoomText’ which enables visually impaired persons to enlarge the text on the screen. Computers and smartphones also offer text-to-speech, commonly known under the name ‘Screen reader’ technology. HumanWare works together with a company named Code Factory to give its customers a full range of available products.

HumanWare also has a number of direct competitors. Some of them compete in all three market segments, while others compete in only one or two. Listed below are some of HumanWare’s most important competitors:

**Plextor**: Plextor, a subsidiary of the Japanese company Shinano Kenshi Corporation, has a digital talking book line called ‘PlexTalk’. This product is in direct competition with the Victor Reader products. 10

**GW Micro**: GW Micro, a US based company founded in 1990, provides assistive technologies for both blind and visually impaired individuals. They are most known for their Braille notetakers: The BrailleSense and the VoiceSense. These products are similar to HumanWare’s BrailleNote product line. GW Micro also sells its products internationally and has more recognition in mainland Europe than HumanWare. 11

**Freedom Scientific**: Freedom Scientific, an American company that claims to be the largest worldwide manufacturer of assistive technology for the blind and visually impaired, is based in Florida and has a product line for children with learning disabilities. Developing both hardware and software, they have the largest in-house made product line in the industry. 12

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10 [http://www.plextor.be/](http://www.plextor.be/)
11 [www.gwmicro.com](http://www.gwmicro.com)
12 [http://www.freedomscientific.com](http://www.freedomscientific.com)
**Optelec:** This Dutch company focuses on the market for Low Vision. It manufactures various CCTV products, both hand held and desktop reading machines.  

**ViewPlus:** In 1996, Dr. G Gardner founded ViewPlus in Oregon, United States. ViewPlus develops products for people with print and sensory disabilities. Their product line mainly consists of Braille Printers. They also manufacture the IVEO Learning system that combines touch with spoken and written text.

**Times Corporation:** Times Corp, the biggest CCTV manufacturer in Japan, has a significant market share and high customer loyalty. They are HumanWare’s main competitor in Japan.

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14 [http://www.viewplus.com](http://www.viewplus.com)
15 [http://www.times.ne.jp/index.html](http://www.times.ne.jp/index.html)
### 1.8.2. Industry Analysis: Porter’s Five Forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat of New Entrants: Low</th>
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<tr>
<td>The low vision market is a limited niche market. For this reason, the number of competitors is relatively low. Market entry requires high R&amp;D investments and substantial capital expenditures to develop an appropriate infrastructure capable of facing the existing competition.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bargaining Power of Suppliers: Low</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The products offered are made with materials that can be supplied by various suppliers. The relative abundance of possible suppliers keeps the suppliers’ bargaining power low.</td>
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<th>Rivalry among existing competitors is Moderate</th>
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<td>Moderate</td>
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<tr>
<th>Threat of Substitute products or services: High</th>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic products for the visually impaired are effective but very expensive. Other non-electronic products are available for a much lower price. Apart from that, the medical service and advancements pose a serious threat.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bargaining Power of Buyers: Low</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>With only a handful of suppliers offering their devices in the same price range, the buyers are left with low bargaining power. Due to the high demand caused by the reliance of buyers to the products and the absence of lower cost substitutes, buyers readily pay the asked price.</td>
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Figure 2: Porter's five forces
1.9. **SWOT- ANALYSIS**

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<th><strong>Strengths</strong></th>
<th><strong>Weaknesses</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>– Technological: R&amp;D team and innovation</td>
<td>– Price: Expensive products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Interpersonal: Good customer relationship. Customer loyalty and satisfaction.</td>
<td>– Product benefits: Low POD with competitors (especially in Low Vision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Partnerships with functionality competitors</td>
<td>– Market: Low market share in most important market, the US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Image: Good products, nice people</td>
<td>– Financial: Sales are going down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Staff: Motivated and company-oriented</td>
<td>– Low brand awareness outside Canada and USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Opportunities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Threats</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Demographic environment: Aging population: Growing number of people with deteriorating sight.</td>
<td>– Medical advancement: Medical treatments for Low Vision and diabetes. ¹⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Political environment: Existence of advocacy groups which lobby for use of technology</td>
<td>– Economic environment: Retirement money goes down unable to pay for expensive products. ¹⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Socio-cultural environment: Search for equality.</td>
<td>– Socio-cultural environment: Lack of knowledge about blindness and low vision. People don’t see low vision as age-related, but rather as illness-related.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Technological environment: Inventions that boost product abilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


¹⁸ [http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx](http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx)
1.10. CONCLUSIONS

HumanWare is valued highly in the industry and in organizations for the blind and visually impaired. The firm puts great efforts in creating innovative products that help blind and visually impaired people rebuild their independence. “Regaining independence” is actually HumanWare’s slogan and they strive to live up to it. The products made by HumanWare are generally of high quality and strive to meet consumers’ needs as well as possible. HumanWare frequently updates its products, sometimes even replacing older products with newer iterations for free. However, the product offering among competitors is very similar as innovative products are replicated quickly and distinguished by adding small features.

While carrying out my research on HumanWare’s competitors, I was surprised to see that HumanWare’s products were promoted on competitors’ websites. HumanWare also displayed its competitor products on their webpage. I believe this to be done in order to place additional offerings on the website, truly help consumers for whom product comparison can be a daunting task, and starts partnerships with companies that complete the product line.

During my internship at HumanWare I felt that everyone around me truly cared for the products and for the people in need of them. I had the chance to interview customers at numerous occasions and all of them referred to HumanWare as being a company with a heart. The company not only wants to sell products, they try to guide their customers through the different steps of using and updating their products. In all their actions, communications and products, HumanWare always attempts to delight the customer by offering something which society deprives them of: inclusion. The non-discrimination I witnessed at HumanWare, both internally and externally, is perhaps their greatest source of goodwill. It is so strong and so well expressed through the products that it can be felt even in the hallways of the office.
2. THEORETICAL RESEARCH: CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the following section, this paper will present a model that aims to optimize intercultural business interactions and transactions. The question to solve is simple: how can a company effectively engage in and assess communication with a company from a different culture?\textsuperscript{19}

For starters, this paper will present the proposed model and the underlying research sustaining it. It will then be field-tested using my internship experiences. Originating from Belgium, but working for a Canadian company as a liaison with Japan, I observed both cultures without possessing neither frame of reference; allowing me to be an impartial observer. These two countries, the companies and the people involved, therefore form an excellent case study to test and validate the model.

2.1. MOTIVATION

Working in a country across the Atlantic and dealing with communication to and from Japan made my choice of research subject fairly logical. Cross-cultural communication has become an every-day reality for most companies, as it is for me.

In my opinion, intercultural business consists in essence of communication between two or more parties from different cultures in which at least one of the parties wants to achieve a goal with the aid of the other party. For the goal to be reached, the communication between the two parties has to go as smoothly as possible. The more frictions, the less likely either parties’ goal will be accomplished. Thus, I wish to elaborate a model that may be easily used by businessmen/businesswomen, may be applied to all intercultural business interactions and will optimize their ability to successfully interact with entities worldwide.

\textsuperscript{19} Or to optimize encounters within a company’s own culture.
2.2. THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

I like to think of communicators as pieces of a puzzle. There are endless shapes; some shapes can fit together, others can’t. The same thing goes for communicators. Sometimes, the people will be irreconcilably different or will have different goals leading the communication to go awry or cease, no matter the technique used. Some puzzle pieces however have the right shapes, but that doesn’t mean that they are pointed in the right direction. Communicators can have enough similarities to start a relationship, but in order to build that relationship, they have to grow towards each other and just like pieces of a puzzle, they have to turn into the right direction in order to come together.

Every person, whether from a different culture or not, has his own baggage. This baggage consists of a large variety of elements, ranging from national culture through the values supported by the corporate culture to specific personality traits. This baggage is what shapes a communicator and the more a baggage is different from the baggage of the interlocutor, the harder it will be for the parties to align with each other and bring the communication process to the desired outcome.

In order for this communication process to go as smoothly as possible, the communicator has to run through three main steps: He has to become aware of the possible differences and similarities between him and his interlocutor, he has to use this awareness to seek information relating to these differences and similarities and thirdly, the communicator has to repeat the previous process and adapt his actions.

2.2.1. Step I: Empty the Cup

There is a Japanese tale about a Zen-monk who meets a Zen professor for tea. The monk pours the cup of the professor until it starts running over the edges. When the professor calls him on it, the monk compares him to the overfull cup and encourages him to empty his prejudice and assumptions in order to truly learn Zen.

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20. This ‘Baggage’ is comparable to what Hofstede has called “Software of the mind”. Hofstede: 2001, p. 428
“Nan-In, a master during the Meiji era, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-In served tea. He poured his visitors cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It’s overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-In said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”22

The same can be said for businessmen trying to engage in intercultural transactions. Before they begin to learn about the different aspects involved, they have to let go of everything that they already have in their mind about their interlocutor and their baggage. In order for the learning process to truly be effective, they have to let go of what they think they know, for example stereotypes, and open their mind to new information.

Clearing the mind allows one to become aware of the different baggage an interlocutor can have. This awareness is key in order to move on to the second step: to fill the cup with as much critical information as possible.

2.2.2. Step II: Fill the Cup

In order to shape himself and find the right direction to get the desired results out of an intercultural encounter, a communicator needs the right information. When he has emptied his cup of all previous opinions and speculations23, he can start filling it with the information needed for this particular encounter.

There are three categories of information a cross-cultural communicator needs to inquire about. Firstly, it is essential to find out information about his own baggage: What is his own culture, what is his regional culture, what has shaped him into the person he is now and what personality does he have. This information will greatly influence the communication, and being aware of one’s own cultural baggage will aid in shaping oneself to match the interlocutors’ specific puzzle shape.

22 Zenzaki: 2004, p. 13
23 See Japanese Zen tale.
Secondly, the same information inquiry should be done about the interlocutors’ baggage. Since, for example with new encounters, it is not always possible to gather information about the personal aspect of the interlocutor, it is imperative to find out the baggage that is not personally related, such as his cultural and national background. In relation to this, Geert Hofstede has written that there are three levels of mental programming, namely the universal, the collective and the individual level. The universal level contains all shared humankind mental encoding, such as basic human emotions like laughing and anger. The individual level is the distinctive and alternative behavior of a human being within a certain collective culture. This level of behavior is what makes everyone unique. The level in between these two is the collective level. This level groups the behavior of people within a certain group or category.²⁴

In order to make intercultural encounters successful, it is the individual and collective level of both the user and the interlocutor that need to be discovered. However, the individual level will only be accessible after a certain amount of communication has already taken place. This is why the collective level is the first one to engage in when trying to define the shape and direction of the interlocutor.

When the user has gathered the previously mentioned information about himself and the other communication parties, there is still a third set of information to assess. It is necessary to bring both information sets together and evaluate the relationship between the two. It is necessary to figure out the critical differences between the user and the interlocutor and the similarities on which the user can learn to find a common ground and improve the communication.

2.2.2.1. National Culture

There are several existing theories that can help gather information about the communicator and his interlocutor. One of the most used and renowned theories about the differences in cultural behavior is Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory. In his book, Culture’s Consequences, he discusses five universal categories of culture, which form the basis of any culture, and thus any cultural interactions.²⁵

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²⁴ Hofstede: 2001, p. 2
²⁵ Ibid. p. 28
Hofstede used nations as the entities to study culture; assuming that those are the best available units for comparison, although he agrees that they are not ideal.\textsuperscript{26} His data was collected between 1967-1973 and was originally taken from data gathered by IBM (International Business Machines). IBM conducted the same survey in over 50 countries it had subsidiaries in, in order to maintain control over the company’s distinctive culture all around the world and consequently had a section of questions dealing with values, ethics and business practices. These questions made the survey an excellent starting point for a cultural study.\textsuperscript{27} Because the research data used by Hofstede are data from company employees, it also gives a good basis for my research, which is in the field of business as well.

Through analyzing the data in the IBM study, Hofstede discovered five independent elements that, according to him, constitute the basis of culture and which define the differences between various cultures. At first, only four elements were identified, namely Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Individualism and Masculinity. A fifth and last index was found through the work of fellow researchers. This dimension became known as the Long-term index.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Power Distance}\textsuperscript{29}

“\textit{Power distance [in organizations] is the measure of interpersonal power or influence between a boss and his subordinate as perceived by the less powerful of the two: the Subordinate.}”\textsuperscript{30} Power distance is built up out of the idea of human inequality. This inequality can be found in every country and culture, but in certain cultures, this gap is bigger than in others. Inequality can be found in areas such as wealth, power and prestige and there is usually a consistency between two or all three of those. This inequality springs from a ‘dominance behavior’, which is innate to all human beings. What distinguishes cultures on this topic however, is the way the dominance, or inequality is worked out within the society. Some cultures have a complex system of dominance, while other cultures will try to de-emphasize it. Power distance is about stratification of the society, and this highly relies on the collective cultural system.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid. p. 73
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid. p. 52-53
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid. p. 353
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid. p. 79- 143
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid. p. 83
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid. pp. 80-83
\end{itemize}
According to John Playford, there are two types of countries or cultures with regard to power distance. One is the elitist culture, the other the pluralist culture. In a pluralist culture, there are so-called `criss-cross` or middle groups in the society. These are individuals who are part of various groups within the society and can therefore serve as a bridge in case of conflict between elite and non-elite groups. In elitist societies, the gap between elitists and non-elitists is much larger.

Hofstede links this stratification system to a deeper value system within collective culture. The ‘elitist’ cultures are those countries with a high power distance. These cultures have a well-defined and highly layered hierarchy. Applied to organizations, this would mean that the gap between a boss and his subordinate is much larger, and that the power a superior possesses, needs less legitimation than it would need in a culture where there is less power distance, where boss and subordinate are therefore closer together.

Distance in social relationships is inherent in human beings and is also necessary in order to maintain control and order in an organization, but the degree of distance between people, can vary across nations and cultures. Power distance, whether it is between employer and employee, father and child or teacher and pupil, is widely accepted by the social environment and even encouraged. The distance is part of the collective culture.

Cultures with a high power distance, such as Malaysia or Belgium, have tall pyramids of organization and a more concentrated system of authority and decision-making; Rules are important and subordinates expect to be told what to do and will execute tasks as they are told. Cultures with a lower power distance, such as Canada and Austria, however, have a more decentralized organizational structure; Subordinates work alongside of their boss and are more involved in the decision-making process.

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32 Playford: 1976, p. 383
33 The existence of higher social mobility is a good indicator of a pluralist society. Playford: 1976, p. 388-389.
34 In his book Culture’s Consequences Hofstede give a good example to show the difference in Power distance between various countries. In 1974, Hofstede saw the then prime minister of the Netherlands, Joop den Uyl, with his trailer on a camping ground in Portugal. He argues that this is only possible, because the Netherlands have a very low Power distance, and thus the prime minister is viewed as just another Dutch person on a low budget holiday. It would be hard to imagine, however, seeing the prime minister of Japan or even France sitting in a folding chair outside of a trailer.
35 Hofstede: 2001, p. 83
36 Smith and Yeh have researched techniques used by managers when dealing with subordinates. They found that there are differences between countries with high and low power distance. For example: Japanese managers (High Power Distance) use ‘assertive reasoning’ and ‘invoking higher authority’, as opposed to ‘bargaining’ and
Uncertainty Avoidance

Human beings live with uncertainties of which they are aware and they have developed ways of dealing with these uncertainties. Different cultures not only have a different way of dealing with this future, but there is also a difference between the degrees of tolerance towards uncertainty.\(^{38}\)

Uncertainty can also be described as ‘ambiguity’. According to Hofstede, people have dealt with this uncertainty through three domains: Technology, law and religion. Therefore this dimension is related to topics such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, dogmatism, superstition, racism, traditionalism and intolerance towards different opinions.\(^{39}\) These elements will be found more often or stronger present in countries or cultures with a higher uncertainty avoidance index.

Organizations use rules and rituals to make the behavior of people more predictable. For example: Business meetings have their own language and taboos, and companies execute control mechanisms and computer simulations to avoid uncertain outcomes.\(^{40}\) In work situations, uncertainty avoidance is related to employment stability, seniority and generation gaps. Countries with a higher uncertainty avoidance generally attach more importance to the above criteria; People have a tendency to stay longer with their employer, managers are selected on basis of seniority and company loyalty is perceived as a virtue.\(^{41}\)

people with high uncertainty avoidance usually have a more hurried social life; They have a constant need to be busy. People in these countries usually show a tendency to be more precise and punctual. Anxiety here is released by showing emotions, whereas in low uncertainty countries it is released by passive relaxation. The latter are usually more open to change and new ideas and they are curious to what is different. Although innovation in high uncertainty avoidance countries is more difficult, it is certainly not impossible, even, once the change is accepted, it is taken more seriously than in countries with low uncertainty avoidance.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{37}\) Hofstede: 2001, pp. 145-208

\(^{38}\) Ibid. p. 159-160

\(^{39}\) Ibid. p. 146

\(^{40}\) It must be noted however, that uncertainty avoidance does not mean ‘risk avoidance’. Uncertainty avoidance is not restricted to a specific object. It is a general feeling, rather than a percentage of possibility. Ibid. pp.146-147

\(^{41}\) Ibid. p. 165

\(^{42}\) Ibid. pp. 167-169
Individualism versus Collectivism

Human species are in essence social and gregarious beings. However, some cultures have a lower degree in group orientation than others. In some countries, such as the Netherlands or the US, the individual is the benchmark of all reasoning and goals. In other countries, the prosperity of the group or society is more important than individual desires.

Individualism is reflected in the way people live together. In most Western countries, nuclear families are the standard way of living, but in numerous other countries, 3 or 4 generations will live together under one roof. In these last, it is usually seen as unethical to leave the older generation by themselves and as such the extended family is socially required. In collective organizations, people are more emotionally dependent on the organization. However, in order to maintain collectivism, a certain harmony must be achieved: the organization has to give responsibility in return, if not, the two poles will be in disharmony, and the people will shift towards individualism.

In an individualist working environment, a person chooses a job based on the content and whether that coincides with his own interests and needs. In a collectivist culture, an employer will hire a candidate based on his commonalities with the company culture. The employee then becomes part of the ‘in-group’, the company ‘family’. In this sense, a collectivist work culture is linked to job sustainability and company loyalty: A misstep will not get an employee fired, but it will rather redefine his assignments and his position within the company.

Masculinity versus Femininity

"The only difference between women and men that is absolute, is that woman bear children and men beget them." People contribute, however, other actions to male and female behavior, which are not directly related to men or women. For example, women generally attach more importance to relationships and are more caring, and men are more competitive. Differences like these exist in all

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43 Morrison: 2006, p. 120
44 Hostede:2001, p. 209
45 Ibid. p. 225
46 Ibid. p. 235-236
47 Ibid. pp. 279-350
48 Ibid. p. 280
49 Ibid. p.281
cultures and are, with some exceptions, quite alike all over the world. According to Hofstede, in almost all cultures, men take on more ‘tough’ roles, roles associated with assertiveness, and women adopt more tender roles, associated with nurturance.

Hofstede’s Masculinity dimension focuses on the division of gender roles within a society and the gap there is between those roles. In a masculine society the gap is bigger than in a feminine society. The distinction between though and tender roles will be more explicit. In a feminine society, the “social gender roles overlap: Both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life”.

In the working environment of a masculine society, people live to work, whereas in a feminine society, people have the feeling to work to live. Masculine cultures have goals orientated towards pay, security and job content. Masculine business is about survival of the fittest. Managers in masculine cultures will be more decisive and accustomed to seeking consensus. Feminine cultures have goals oriented towards relationships and physical conditions. Their managers are less visible and more intuitive and directed towards cooperative venture. Both types of countries will naturally excel in different industries or fields. Masculine cultures are better manufacturers of heavy equipment and in bulk chemistry, Feminine culture will rather excel in services, agricultural exploitation and bio-chemistry.

**Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Orientation**

This fifth dimension, long term orientation, was only added to the list when Michel Bond published the results of a research in China. Bond called this dimension: Confucian work ethic. After a review of the IBM data, Hofstede found this dimension in 22 countries apart from China. Because not only eastern cultures possess this dimension, Hofstede re-baptized it: Long-term orientation.

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51 Mead has argued that there is a tribe in New Guinea where these common ‘gender roles’ are reversed: The women in the Tchambuli tribe excel in practical matters, while the men focus on non-aggressive matters. Mead: 1962, pp. 102-107
52 Hofstede: 2001, pp. 297-298
53 Ibid. p. 297
54 Ibid. p. 236
55 Ibid. p. 314
56 Ibid.: pp. 351-372
57 It was called after the leading life orientation in China, Confucianism, which focuses on respecting existing social structures and hard work.
58 Hofstede:2001, p. 352
Organizations with a long term orientation are generally more orientated towards tradition. They also attach more importance to keeping face and consequently react more serious to loosing face. Businesses in long term oriented cultures work towards building strong positions in the market, and are willing to forget about immediate results in order to ensure a better future. Businesses in short term cultures are more concerned with today’s results and with a “bottom line”.  

Based on the previous five dimensions, the countries questioned were given a score on each. In the following table, I will indicate the scores and rank for Belgium, the US and Canada, and Japan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>score</td>
<td>rank</td>
<td>score</td>
<td>rank</td>
<td>score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Distance</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long term orientation</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Index of Hofstede dimensions for Belgium, USA, Canada and Japan.

Hofstede divided all countries involved into 12 branches. The countries were clustered together according to historical background, linguistic characteristics and of course, cultural approximation. Three clusters are relevant for this research:

1. Australia, United States of America, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and Ireland
2. Belgium and France
3. Japan

59 Ibid.: p. 361
60 There is no score for Long term orientation for Belgium or for France. This category was not found in the data provided by IBM. However, we can assume that, like the other European countries in which it was discovered, it will be short term orientated rather than long term.
61 For a complete list of country clusters: Hofstede: 2001, p. 62
62 Because the data of the USA and Canada are very similar, and since Hofstede branched them together as well, I will, in the following steps, apply information on business and communication in the United States to Canada as well.
63 This cluster counts for French-speaking as well for Flemish Belgians. The indexes show that Flanders is culturally much closer to France than it is to the Netherlands, despite the common language. Ibid.: p. 63
64 Japan is placed all by itself by Hofstede. It has a cultural background and value system significantly different from other East-Asian countries.
2.2.2.2. Corporate Culture

In intercultural communication, not only differences between cultures are important, but it is also significant to look at the company itself. As it was evident in my own experience during my internship, one company in a certain culture, does not equal another company in that same culture, and consequently, the interactions between both will be different.

There are several different theories that have been uttered about corporate culture. Deal and Kennedy have constructed four types of organizations, based on two axes: Risk and Feedback and Reward.\textsuperscript{65} Cameron and Quinn saw four other types of company culture in their research, based on variations of flexibility and focus.\textsuperscript{66}

For this research, however, I have chosen to use the 6 cross-organizational dimensions explained by Hofstede and Neuijen.\textsuperscript{67} I chose these dimensions because I believe they are more exhaustive and applicable to all cultures - the mere choice of names for the dimensions for example- but also because the research was done as an (important) extension of the cross-cultural value dimensions. For these reasons, I believe the Hofstede cross-organizational dimensions are the best complement to his cross-national dimensions.

The first dimension is the opposition between \textit{process} and \textit{result orientation}. Apart from the obvious difference, the first kind of company is also risk avoiding and the second is more comfortable in unfamiliar situations. The second opposition is \textit{employee} versus \textit{job orientation}. The first company is concerned with people and personal problems are taken into account. The second company can build up a strong pressure on its employees and emphasizes on getting the job done. Thirdly, Hofstede opposed \textit{parochial companies} to \textit{professional companies}. The first are companies which highly value the aptness of their employees’ value frame with the company. The norms of an employee will not only be similar to the company norms, but over time, they will synchronize and become to define the house norms of the employee as well. In a professional company, the employee identifies not with the company, but with

\textsuperscript{65}The types are: Tough-guy/Macho Company, Bet you company, Process culture, Work hard/play hard company. Deal; Kennedy: 1982, pp. 107-128
\textsuperscript{66}The four categories are: Clan, Adhocracy; Hierarchy and Market. Cameron; Quinn: 2006, p. 46
\textsuperscript{67}Hofstede; Neuijen; et al.: 1990, p. 303
the type of job he is executing. In this case, an organization will hire an employee based on a specific set of skills and abilities, rather than on the basis of a set of norms.\textsuperscript{68}

The communication climate in a company can differ as well. Some companies are more open, which gives employees the idea that they are more at home. Other companies have a closed culture in which employees are more reserved. Another difference between companies can be found on the field of internal structuring. Some companies are very cost-conscious and punctual, Hofstede called this type of company a tight company. The opposite, a loose company, deals with internal meeting more to approximation, is less sensible towards costs and the people are more likely to joke around about their job and the company in general. The last opposition Hofstede makes is a normative versus pragmatic company. This division is made based on the amount of structuring a company has in its external contacts. Hofstede calls this “Customer orientation”.\textsuperscript{69} Normative companies follow a fixed set of rules when engaging in external communication. According to Hofstede, they have “high business ethics and honesty”.\textsuperscript{70} Pragmatic companies on the other hand, are market driven, they will change their approach according to their customers’ needs.\textsuperscript{71}

2.2.2.3. Personality

Every person is unique. Although there are similarities between people from one culture, there are differences in behavior as well. This is what Hofstede has referred to as the individual level.\textsuperscript{72} These different behaviors can be categorized themselves. There are different theories about personality types, but I believe the one conceived by Carl Jung and elaborated by Myers and Briggs\textsuperscript{73} is the most exhaustive and universal system.

Although these types were constructed with the Western world in mind, I believe they hold up in all cultures. Although people from the USA might perceive people from Japan as all quiet and introvert people, the Japanese have among them still people who are more extravert or more introvert than others.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.: pp. 302-304
\textsuperscript{69} Hofstede: 2001, p. 399
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Hofstede: 1990, p. 304
\textsuperscript{72} Hofstede: 2001, p.2
\textsuperscript{73} The system is also called the MBTI-personality indicator.
The 16 personality types by Myers and Briggs are based on four dichotomies of preference.\textsuperscript{74} The first preference is about one’s favorite world. This can lead to either \textit{Introversion} (I) or \textit{Extraversion} (E). The second opposition is \textit{Sensing} (S) and \textit{Intuition} (N), which respectively mean focusing on basic information or interpreting and adding meaning to information. The third juxtaposition is about decision-making. When one makes decisions based on logic and consistency they prefer \textit{Thinking} (T), when one considers the people and the circumstances rather than the first, one prefers \textit{Feeling} (F). The last opposition is found in the field of structure. One can prefer to make quick decisions and be \textit{Judging} (J) or one can hold decision off until more information is available and be \textit{Perceiving} (P)\textsuperscript{75}

According to Myers and Briggs, the combination of these dichotomies give the following 16 personality possibilities.\textsuperscript{76}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISTJ</th>
<th>ISFJ</th>
<th>INFJ</th>
<th>INTJ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Quiet, serious</td>
<td>- Quiet, friendly</td>
<td>- seeks meaning and motivation in people</td>
<td>- original minds and drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Practical, decide logical</td>
<td>- Accurate</td>
<td>- conscientious &amp; serving common good</td>
<td>- quickly see patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Orderly and organized</td>
<td>- Considerate and harmonious</td>
<td></td>
<td>- skeptical and independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- high standards for self and others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISTP</th>
<th>ISFP</th>
<th>INFP</th>
<th>INTP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Tolerant and flexible</td>
<td>- Quiet and kind</td>
<td>- Idealistic and loyal</td>
<td>- Seek logical explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Efficient and workable solutions</td>
<td>- Like own space</td>
<td>- Curious</td>
<td>- Unusual ability to focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Quiet until problem</td>
<td>- Dislike conflicts</td>
<td>- Adaptable, flexible</td>
<td>- Skeptical and analytical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{74} Myers and Briggs: http://www.myersbriggs.org
\textsuperscript{75} Myers and Briggs: http://www.myersbriggs.org
\textsuperscript{76} Myers and Briggs: http://www.myersbriggs.org
2.2.3. Step III: Repeat and Adapt

When you have assessed yourself and your interlocutor, subjected the baggage to the previous dimensions and you have found the relation between your own and the other person, you can engage in intercultural communication. However, having the information at hand does not guarantee that the encounters will go smoothly from the first time on. Most likely your efforts will have a trial and error pattern, but it is very important that you keep looking for feedback, whether it is verbal feedback or physical. A communicator cannot and should not be afraid of making mistakes or being embarrassed, because it is from this process, he will learn the most about interacting with a particular culture.\(^{77}\)

During the communication process, when the user runs into a problem or when a trial has failed, he needs to take any of the feedback that he received and actively think about adjusting and adapting the approach. He can do that by revising the second step and reassessing the relationship between his own and the interlocutor’s baggage, expanded with the experience and knowledge the interaction has brought to the information package.

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\(^{77}\) Hofstede: 2001, p. 430
2.3. THE MODEL APPLIED

In order to validate the previous model, I will apply it to my experiences during my internship at HumanWare. Let us assume that the people at HumanWare involved with business undertakings in Japan have emptied their cup. To refill it, it is necessary to gain as much information as possible about the national culture of the people involved, in this case Canada, and the national culture of our interlocutors, in this case Japan. Apart from national culture, I will also take a look at the company culture and employees of HumanWare and, as much as possible, the Japanese companies and their employees involved. Lastly, through surveys, I have gathered information on how the employees at HumanWare perceived their interactions with Japan and I will use those to assess the communication between both cultures.

2.3.1. Cultural Dimensions in Japan and Canada

As apparent from the graphs below, there are some considerable differences between Japanese and Canadian cultures. These differences have their repercussions in communication between the two.

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78 In this theoretical part, I will give myself a position of observer rather than participant. This to make the application more simple (only two countries involved instead of three). I will elaborate about my own actions at HumanWare in the third part of this dissertation, the internship report.
Although I was working in a Canadian company, I myself am a Belgian, with a Belgian background and Belgian values. This changed my personal frame of reference when communicating with Japan by order of HumanWare. Therefore I put a comparison of Japan, Belgium and Canada, in order to visually capture the differences between the three. I believe that the fact my cultural baggage is different from either Japan and Canada and neither closer to the one or the other, makes me a better observant than if I would have either of the two cultures in my personal baggage.

Japan is, according to Hofstede’s data, the most masculine country of all 52 surveyed countries, this would imply that Japan has a major gap between male and female roles. This is manifested into the everyday life of Japan. In Japan, for example, women generally only work until they get married, or in some cases, until they have their first child. When the child is older, the wife might take a part-time job, called arubaito (アルバイト). Man are traditionally the career-minded sex.79

One could argue that times are changing, and more and more women are independent and equal to men, and one would be right to some extent. However, only three years ago I was in Japan, and women not married with children at 30 were still frowned upon and in practically all of the families I met, the mothers were housewives. I remember talking to a special ‘gifted’ class in a women’s high school. These girls were given extra curriculum in order to make it to a good university. However, these girls’ ambitions did not lie in the professional field, because all of them wished to find a good husband and planned to stay at home to take care of their children and take up a part-time job later in life.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canada however is one of the most equal countries when it comes to women on the work field. In 1995, the Canadian government executed a research to fully grasp the status of women in the various provinces. In Canada women generally work full time, taking only a certain time off when a child is born. They are paid equally and many companies have worked out systems of flexible working hours and such to give women the opportunity to work and have a family at the same time.80 The Canadian government has also funded daycare institutions and these are very

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79 Sugimoto: 2001, pp. 154-155
80 Status of Women Canada: 1995, pp. 21-22
commonly used in Canada. The Quebec region of Canada (where HumanWare is situated) also has a very high level of cohabitation, another indicator of low masculinity.\(^{81}\)

Although Belgium scored higher on uncertainty avoidance, Japan is still in the top ten countries dealing badly with ambiguity and uncertainty towards the unknown. Japan tends to deal with this intolerance through a highly structured society and technology. When comparing two major cities in the world, Tokyo and New York, you’ll notice immediately big differences. In Tokyo, there’s a rule against throwing things on the floor, making the city a clean area, despite its size. When taking an escalator, people will always stand on the left and walk on the right, because that’s the rule.\(^{82}\) These are things that are harder to find in New York. However, the roles are reversed when talking about cultural diversity: Tokyo has a much more homogenous population than New York.

In Japanese business life, following rules is as important as competences. Japanese have very strict rules on how to behave in a company and interaction rules are very elaborate and strict, this way, everyone always knows how other people are going to react. For example, when two business men meet, they will immediately exchange business cards, this in not only a form of politeness, it is also necessary for Japanese to determine the level of their company, in order to adjust their level of politeness and not lose face.\(^{83}\) And, although lifetime employment has become a myth, Japanese people generally work much longer for one employer than the average Canadian, for example.\(^{84}\)

Canada has a much lower uncertainty avoidance index. This can be found, for example in its tolerance for different cultures and different points of view.\(^{85}\) Canada also has a lot of entrepreneurial businesses, a much larger amount of people own and want to own their proper business and be their own boss.\(^{86}\)

Japan also has elaborated hierarchical structures, both in personal and professional life. Japanese businessmen add the suffix ‘sama’ (様), to their boss’ name. This suffix is usually translated as ‘master’

\(^{81}\) Laplante: 2006, pp. 1-2
\(^{82}\) Sugimoto: 2001, p. 271
\(^{83}\) De Mente: 1994, p. 24
\(^{84}\) Another good example of uncertainty avoidance in the Japanese work sphere is the autobiographic story told by Amélie Nothomb in her book “Stupeur et Tremblements”. In this book, Amélie’s talents and skills are of no importance, on the contrary, she is penalized for
\(^{85}\) This is said to come from the fact that there is no ;Canadian Whittle: 1997, p.154.
\(^{86}\) Stoffman: 1988, p. 61
and shows a considerable distance between a boss and his subordinate. Also, when a colleague is displeased with another colleague’s work, he cannot address the colleague directly. Rather the complaint will go up the ladder to the employee’s immediate superior, which will inform his immediate boss and up to the person who is capable of making decisions about this. When a decision is made, the ladder is descended once more down to the colleague’s immediate superior, who will then inform him of the complaint and decision.\(^87\)

In Canada, these hierarchical structures are much less present. Although it can vary among companies, generally, boss and subordinate have a much closer relationship and operate more as a team than as an hierarchical ladder. At HumanWare, I was immediately told to call everyone by their first name. As an intern I had practically only people above me, but they consulted me and involved me in decision-making processes never the less. The second week of my internship, the company CEO was in the office where I was working.\(^88\) He walked into my office, and personally welcomed me to the company and told me I could alarm him if anything went wrong. Although this as well is partly company related, something I will discuss later, it still shows that the gap between employer and employee is much smaller than in Japan, where such a thing would simply not be possible.

In general, Japan is deemed a collectivist culture by Western standards, but, as becomes evident from its moderate score on individualism, in regard to other Asian countries, Japan is an individualist country. The Japanese are very individualist when it comes to housing and health. The Japanese have a growing problem of isolation and depression in the cities.\(^89\) Long working hours and small apartments in overcrowded cities breach the social interaction. On the other hand, Japan still has highly sophisticated social systems, and with it, a strong social control system.\(^90\) For example, Japanese housewives are usually involved in community committees with other housewives, these activities are desired to build and maintain social contacts and are a fundamental part of Japanese women’s lives.\(^91\)

In the workforce this collectivism is shown in the way employees of a certain company behave. The company one works for will be called ‘heisha’ (弊社), and stands for ‘our firm’, whereas other companies

\(^{87}\) Mouer; Kawanishi: 2005, pp. 117-144  
\(^{88}\) As explained in the first part of this dissertation, the CEO is based in another location.  
\(^{89}\) This isolation has been the topic of various Japanese Best-sellers, such as Kitchen, by the renown Japanese author, Yoshimoto Banana.  
\(^{90}\) Sugimoto: 2001, pp. 272-275  
\(^{91}\) White: 1987, pp. 150-151
will be called ‘onsha’ (御社), meaning ‘your company’. These terms refer to what is called the ‘in-group’ and the ‘out-group’. Once hired in a certain company, an employee becomes a part of that company as if it would be his family. Employees will also work together in small control groups.92

In Canada, people are hired based on their skills and competences. Degrees are important but experience is valued even more highly when it comes to hiring someone. People look for jobs that best fit their profile, and take the company second. Canada also has more and more job-hoppers: When a person isn’t getting the fulfillment he needs out of his job, or sees no growing opportunities, that person will simply go on the look-out for another company that does give him or her those possibilities.

Long Term orientation has been associated with Confucianism and Shinto, an animistic religion that is still present in current-day Japanese life. In relation to long term orientation, Japanese people value leisure time much less important than Canadians or West-Europeans do. They work much harder and postpone their most important personal event to an undefined moment in the future.93 Ryu Cook describes this long-term orientation in Japan and relates it to the idea that Japan and other Asian countries view all business relations and actions not in the light of immediate results, but in terms of future gain and part of a bigger reality.

“Japan tends to understand social interactions in the context of the long-term. Their personal, social and business relationships are maintained and reinforced through continuous and long-term associations. Both current problems and advantages are generally viewed in the context of outcomes expected in the distant future. Japan fosters virtues oriented towards future reward (as opposed to short-term gain) and discrete transactions are, for the Japanese, generally viewed as part of the larger, more important whole of the on-going relationship.”94

Hofstede did not find a long term dimension in the Canadian IBM surveys. However, it has been put at 23, which is well below the long term orientation index of Japan. In contrast to countries with a long-term orientation, Canadian companies are more interested in the “bottom Line”; It is the results at the end of the day, or at the end of a short-term deadline that counts, and not the potential business

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93 Hofstede: 2001, p. 360
94 Ryu; Cook: 2005: p. 96
opportunities for the future. During my internship in Canada, I often noticed people were looking at current sales and current market opportunities, without looking at the future threats that might even make the company I worked for become obsolete.  

2.3.2. The Organizational Culture of HumanWare, Extra corp. and Nippon Telesoft

During my interviews with the people involved with Japan at HumanWare, I was often reminded of the importance of corporate culture. “Here, at HumanWare? Or in Canada in General?,” was a comment that I heard more than once. Or “I think this, because it’s like this at HumanWare, but if I had to speak for the whole of Quebec [I would say differently].” These comments made me realize how important corporate culture can be. Some companies are right in line with their national culture, but other companies are in fact in conflict with that national culture.

HumanWare is a very open company. From the first day I arrived there, everyone was very helpful and friendly to me and to everyone else in the company. I was immediately brought in to all the company activities and everyone put himself available for questions. At any time, I could have walked up to anyone and pose them questions I had. Since HumanWare is a company which develops products for the visually impaired, they in no way discriminated towards people. There were several blind people and people with low vision working in the company, at various levels. All of the above makes it very easy for a newcomer or even people from outside to feel welcome at HumanWare.

Second, I think HumanWare is an employee oriented company. The company respects the personal life of their employees and has met that respect with flexible hour schedules and the possibility to work from home a certain amount of hours a week. In the summer, HumanWare even has a special ‘summer work schedule’, which allows employees to build up hours and go home on Friday afternoon. Overall, I think the personal lives of employees are taken into account and people feel very appreciated within the company.

Thirdly, I believe HumanWare is a parochial company rather than professional. I do think that people choose to work at HumanWare because the job fits their requirements and people do leave the company

95 Medical enhancements are posing a real threat to HumanWare, however, no plans have been developed to expand to other markets.
when they feel their job no longer has any challenge. However, the people that are working at HumanWare at the time of my internship all had the same profile. Almost everyone is warm and caring, and genuinely interested in their colleagues. Company activities are frequently organized, such as picnics, and golf tournaments, and at birthdays or other employee-related events, lunches were organized. The general company values were to be open to everyone and not to discriminate against anyone, and these values were internalized to the employees as well.

When it comes to the internal structuring of a company, HumanWare leans more to the *loose* side than to the tight side. For example, meeting times are often pushed back when it turns out the time doesn’t suit that well after all. There is no particular dress code and jokes and laughter often sound in the hallways.

Further, HumanWare is a *pragmatic* company, which puts an emphasis on meeting their customers’ expectations. Selling products does not always happen in the same form and selling products comes before respecting certain rules and structures. HumanWare has a very obvious customer orientation when it comes to their external contact structure.

Lastly, I believe HumanWare is *result oriented* company. For example, when the information became available that people with dyslexia were fond of the DAISY players, HumanWare, as one of the only companies in its sector, created a player especially for the dyslexic society. Although this customer group liked their original product, it was a whole new target group which was unfamiliar to HumanWare. Nevertheless, they took this step and they have felt comfortable in taking on this new market segment.

Describing the company cultures of the Japanese companies I was involved with during my three month internship is much more challenging than executing the same for HumanWare. First of all, I only had the opportunity to work with these companies for three months, during which I was introduced as an intern, temporarily handling the communication. Secondly, I only spoke with certain people of these companies, and thirdly, I only communicated over long distance, making it even more difficult to grasp the complete picture of these Japanese companies. However, with the information I was able to gather myself and the
impressions from other HumanWare employees, I will try and build up the company profiles for EXTRA corp and Nippon Telesoft.  

EXTRA corp is the company of a blind man named Jun Ishikawa. The mere fact that he is visually impaired changes him and his company dramatically. EXTRA corp is a company that focuses on helping people with a visual impairment regain independence by making various products and services available to them. In that respect, the company is customer orientated and pragmatic. I also believe EXTRA is a result oriented company. For example, the company purchased a considerable amount of products of HumanWare in order to sell them with a low profit margin without having a deal at hand, making EXTRA a company which is comfortable in uncertain situations.

As I discovered from people working with Jun more often than me, he has a continuously changing schedule. Sometimes he puts meetings very late at night, making it seem like a rather loose company. Further I would say the company seemed patriarchal, for example, his wife is officially president of the company, and very open, just like HumanWare, there is no judgment placed on anyone.

With the second Japanese company, Nippon Telesoft, I dealt with negotiations regarding the purchase of braille cells. I spoke to a couple of people at that company, but not elaborate enough to craft a complete image of their company culture. I was therefore not able to gather information about the internal aspect of their culture. However, it was very clear that Nippon Telesoft is a tight company. The company was very hierarchically structured, as I began to speak to the lowest person in the company and gradually moved up to higher ranking employees. They were very punctual in all of their communications. They never elaborated about anything other than the information I asked for and were very scarce with giving any information, therefore I would classify the company as a closed company.

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96 Although this might be ‘perceived’ corporate culture rather than absolute, this information is still valuable to HumanWare in order to adapt their communication strategy.

97 http://www.extra.co.jp/

98 This is possible because of the time difference between Canada (EST) and Japan.

99 http://www.telesoft.co.jp/english/companyprofile.htm
2.3.3. The People Involved

Personality can make a considerable difference in business across cultures. When dealing with a culture that is different on several levels, the best communicators will be those with an open mind, trying to find a common solution. I will not go into detail about the personalities of the people involved in the Japan projects. There are however some general remarks I wish to make regarding this topic.

One of the most successful Japanese relationships HumanWare built was with Jun Ishikawa, president of the company EXTRA. When inquired about the reason for this success, the employees unanimously referred to his personal character: “Jun is more open.” The personal character of this man apparently greatly influences his way of doing business. The employees at HumanWare felt that they could talk to him easier than to other Japanese people.

Another success story is the relationship with their current Braille cell provider, the Japanese KGS corporation. When asked the same question as above, the answer is similar: The people in charge of the communication with them, are much more direct. The employees at HumanWare see this ‘directness’ as contradictory to their general feeling of Japanese people which is culturally related. The openness and directness of these people in particular can therefore be explained by their personal way of communicating and alters the communication between the two parties greatly.

2.4. THE COMMUNICATION REVIEWED

In order to find out how HumanWare was dealing with the communication with their Japanese partners and prospects I have interviewed the people involved and asked them about communication with Japan. This will give an insight on the relevance and the importance of the various theories elaborated in step 2 of the model. The interview was taken with four people who are the most involved in the communication with Japan. The questions in the survey100 were mostly related to their personal experience in doing business with Japan. They were asked about differences and how they dealt with it.

100 For surveys, see appendix 3
All four of the respondents were aware that there are cultural differences between Canada and Japan. “They are more formal in business” and “The hierarchy is very important”, were some of the comments given. All seemed to be aware of some cultural formalities the Japanese have, such as studying business cards, paying extra attention to thanking people and being extra careful about not involving other people when an issue turns up, “because of the fear of losing face”. “The rituals of tea and at meals can be wearing, and business always takes longer because you can’t take a direct approach,” another respondent said. One person said he always put people above the rank of his correspondent in copy of an e-mail when a job was finished, “it’s the Asian way of saying you’re happy with their work: You help them gain face.”

The main barrier the employees at HumanWare described was language. In business, English appears to be the lingua franca and most non-English countries are used to doing business in both their native language and English. However, in some countries English is not as wide-spread as it is in North-West Europe for example. This poses some obvious problems of communication; if the two parties aren’t able to convey what they want to in a manner that is understandable to the other party, they won’t be able to do business, regardless of cultural or any other differences.

HumanWare experienced this problem in Japan. The employees at Nippon Telesoft barely speak any English and when they tried it was hardly understandable. One way to counter this problem is to hire an interpreter, as HumanWare did. However, as one of the respondents explained, with a translator, there is a long chain of information passing. Especially in a company with high-tech products, such as HumanWare, there are many things that can go wrong in explaining technical details. When HumanWare realized they weren’t getting the information they needed, they tried a different approach. They took me on board as an intern with the knowledge of Japanese. I was integrated into the company and taught all about the market and the products. I sat down with the products developers and learned about the Braille cells in English, before conveying their messages in Japanese. Because HumanWare also had some other Japanese projects pending, this internship made sense for both parties.

A lot of emphasis was also put on the company and the personality of people. “The reason why it didn’t work out, was because the company did not have the same objective,” or “They didn’t understand the US market,” were some of the answers given when asked why some communications in Japan worked and others did not.
Overall the feeling was that there are some cultural differences, on national, corporate and personal level, but these barriers can be worked around. The respondents had experience with working with different cultures, and they found that several issues can be worked around when studying about the culture in particular and being receptive for differences in general. One of the respondents talked about his experiences with doing business in Korea. Koreans have a tendency to highly overstate their first price demand; The first time the correspondent encountered this, he was taken by surprise and did not know how to react. “The second time I was in a similar situation, I had read about it, and I knew that was going to happen, I acknowledged their demand and told them we were not able to accept that particular offer. In the morning, they already had a new, more reasonable offer ready.” This story emphasis the importance of experience and repetition. Although something didn’t go as expected, the respondent gathered information and tried again: He learned from previous experiences and adapted his model.

2.5. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE MODEL

Like all theories, the model above simplifies reality and therefore it has some strengths and weaknesses. The greatest strength of this model is its universality; it can be applied to any company reaching out to any entity. Secondly, the model is easy to use; the three step process is easy to apply and the theory only exists of several dichotomies easily distinguishable. Although, as I have mentioned before, the theories I have used to give content to the model are not exhaustive, that forms no problem in this model; the theories can be easily replaced by other theories, if the user wishes to do so. The model can thus easily be adapted to the users’ needs.

There is one limitation that already became obvious in the application of the model to my internship experience. Once the user comes past the national level, gathering the information about the interlocutor’s company and personality becomes much more difficult and requires already a certain form of relationship. For this reason it is important to follow the third step, repeat and adapt. During the communications, the user will be able to complete the model’s theories with new information. The user must reassess the model every time he is able to add information to it.

There is a second theory related limitation. Theories always simplify reality to a certain extent, and there is a chance that these theories will not completely explain the users’ situation. It must therefore be
mentioned that these theories are guidelines to help the user find the right direction in his communications; it is key to keep an open mind and be attentive to the course of the communication to be aware in case the practice contradicts the theory.

In the case of this model, the user has a considerable influence on the application of the model. Ultimately, the user decides the relationship between him and the interlocutor. Hence the importance of the first step: Empty the cup. Before starting to apply the model, the user should try to achieve a neutral and impartial state of mind towards other cultures. Only with an open mind can the model be optimal.

2.6. CONCLUSION

In order for the user to optimize his cross-cultural communication skills, he must undergo three steps. First, he must be aware of the differences between cultures and he must see that difference as a challenge which he can overcome. Second, he must gather information about the culture he wishes to communicate with, find out more about the company background, and figure out as much as possible about the person or people he is personally communicating with. This information can be analyzed by means of existing theories. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions form an excellent base to assess and compare cultures. Knowing how a culture differs from your own can tell the user in what situations to be extra careful about actions or words.

However, the importance of national cultures must not be overestimated. As it becomes clear through the case study, effective communication is influenced a great deal by the company culture, company motive and as well by the people involved. Language can be another issue. Especially in Asian companies, often people don’t speak sufficient English to use as the business language. As was the case for at least one of the Japanese companies HumanWare communicated with, getting the information across becomes very hard when language problems get in the way. In a case like this, it is important to find someone to speak the language of your interlocutor. This can be a translator, but as my experience at HumanWare shows, it is even better to bring someone with knowledge of the language into the company, especially when the company wishes to continue doing business with this particular country.

The third and last step a cross-cultural communicator has to go through is the reassessment of the information and the communication in general. It is imperative that the user constantly revises and
adapts the comparison of the interlocutors’ background and revises his behavior accordingly. This step ensures a continuous improvement and optimizations of the communication between two parties.

It is my belief that this three step process enables the user to align himself with the other company and his communication partners within the company. With a few hours of work, this model gives the user more insights into the background of his interlocutor and it allows him to constantly rework his personal model. This way, the pieces of the puzzle can take on the right shape and the right direction, so the communication encounters as few friction as possible and the two parties can talk about the matters at hand, without being hindered by cultural differences.
3. **INTERNSHIP REPORT**

In the following chapter I will give a more elaborate overview of the different projects I was entrusted during my internship at HumanWare. I had a main project, that was carried out during the whole three months of my internship and various smaller projects of which I will explain the most interesting ones.

### 3.1. MAIN PROJECT

During my internship at HumanWare, my main project was to communicate with the Japanese partners of HumanWare. This is the reason why I was taken on as a trainee in the company.

#### 3.1.1. Japanese Market

During my internship at HumanWare I was in charge of the communication between HumanWare and its Japanese partners. HumanWare had already built up a network in Japan when I arrived, but they had not made any sales yet. They were about to launch one of their products, the VR stream.

Furthermore, HumanWare was on the look-out for new providers of Braille cells.\(^1\) I was in charge of communicating with a Japanese prospect on that matter: A company called Nippon Telesoft.

#### 3.1.1.1. Project Background

*Nippon Telesoft*

Nippon Telesoft is a company that manufactures Braille-cells and products for the visually impaired. HumanWare has a long-time Braille-cell provider named KGS Corporation\(^2\). KGS as well is a Japanese company that sells equipment for the visually impaired. As I have mentioned before, HumanWare

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\(^1\) A Braille cell exists of 8 electromagnetic pins which go up and down separately in order to form a tactile surface which represents a Braille character. These cells are used in HumanWare’s Braille products, such as the BrailleNote Apex and the Brailliant.

\(^2\) KGS Corporation (Kējiésu Kabushikigaisha, ケージーエス株式会社) was established in 1953 and is based in Saitama, Japan. [http://www.kgs-jpn.co.jp](http://www.kgs-jpn.co.jp)
products are expensive and in order to stay competitive and to upgrade sales, prices have to go down. When it comes to the Braille product line, the highest cost is these expensive Braille cells: One Braille module (a set of 8 Braille cells with a circuit board) can easily cost $300, and a Braille product has at least 2 and sometimes up to 5 of these modules. If HumanWare wants to lower its prices, the company needs to find a cheaper Braille cell dealer. Nippon Telesoft claims to be the cheapest Braille cell provider and therefore HumanWare was interested in doing business with them.

*Special education in Japan*

The Reason why HumanWare chose Japan as a next export country at this particular moment in time is because of changes in the governmental policies towards people with disabilities. In the winter/spring of 2010 the Japanese government passed a law that will guarantee financial aid for the Japanese center for the blind and the Japanese center for the deaf\(^\text{103}\), in order to help children with learning disabilities. This is a target group of HumanWare.

Japan has started to feel the consequences of its aging society and therefore, instead of keeping children with learning disabilities and other impairments in separate schools and classes, Japan aims to integrate those children with less severe impairments (such as dyslexia, ADHD and low vision) into regular schools and classes. With this, Japan hopes to educate more children to a standard high-school level, hoping that this will enlarge their total workforce. In order to do that, Japanese education needs the appropriate tools to give these children the opportunity to function as well in a class environment as children without impairments.

3.1.1.2. Project Progress

Because there were several obstacles in dealing with their Japanese partners, I was asked to take over most of the communication and switch from English as the official language to Japanese. I had two main assignments: The first was to communicate with Nippon Telesoft about Braille cells. The second

\(^{103}\) The national information support institute for the visually impaired: *(zenkoku shiryokushōgaisha jōhō teikyō shisetsu kyōkai, 全国視力障害者情報提供施設協会)*

The national information support institute for the hearing impaired: *(Zenkoku chōkakushōgaisha jōhō teikyō shisetsu kyōkai, 全国聴覚障害者情報提供施設協議会)*
assignment was to find out more information about the governmental policies, the Japanese laws concerning special education and their repercussions for sales possibilities in Japan.

*Nippon Telesoft*

HumanWare had already been communicating with Nippon Telesoft through the Australasia VP Ron Hathaway. He and some other HumanWare employees had already been to Japan as well, and had met with the Nippon Telesoft management. Since the company staff doesn’t speak English very well, they had a Japanese interpreter accompanying them on this trip. However, as I picked up out of my conversations with the people involved, they were not completely convinced that the interpreter conveyed their messages and questions correctly.

After meeting with them Ron Hathaway had a series of e-mails going back and forth between him, HumanWare management and Nippon Telesoft. HumanWare wanted to find out the price of their Braille cell modules and the answer to other questions about customization and so on.¹⁰⁴

I communicated with them through e-mail. I first sent them an e-mail to introduce myself, putting all the people who had already been involved with their company in copy. Since I was an intern, I tried to respect the hierarchy and therefore I sent the e-mail to the correspondent at Nippon Telesoft with the lowest rank. I quickly received an answer saying that they were very happy someone with the knowledge of Japanese was in the company, and they added they were happy communication would go much smoother now.

We needed to find out some specifics about the technical side of the Braille cells, and also, we needed a price quotation. When Ron Hathaway communicated with them, he only got a quick and very confusing quotation, and he didn’t get the information the company needed. Language really seemed the biggest issue here. I asked them to send specific details about the Braille cells and to send a sample piece to the Longueuil office. Although Ron had already asked for a sample, they only sent it after I asked it again in my correspondence with them.

¹⁰⁴ For more detail on the discussed topics, see further.
The hardest thing was the translation of the technical details of the merchandise. I did not know how these functions were called. Therefore I researched Japanese websites of various competitor companies, such as Plextor and Times Corporation. When I could not find the translation, I would phonetically translate them to Japanese, because I knew this was a technique often used by the Japanese themselves.  

During the course of the communication, it became obvious that it was not only language that was impeding the communication, but the company itself was reluctant to talk about prices. I thought this might be related to trust, so I offered Nippon Telesoft a non-disclosure agreement. I hoped that this would let them know that we value their information and that we were not planning on abusing their information. My assumption seemed right, because after this they sent us a quotation and a make-up of their future catalogue.

There prices of their Braille cells ended up being higher than the prices of HumanWare’s current provider. Even with the rebate they were willing to give us, the prices were still almost half more expensive. After negotiating the price further, we realized they weren’t out for selling their Braille cells as competitive as KGS, HumanWare’s current dealer, and I thanked them for their kindness and correspondence. I asked the person who deals with KGS what she thought of the communication with Nippon Telesoft. She answered that she thought they simply didn’t have the same objective as KGS; KGS wants to sell as many Braille cells as possible, having a very good idea of what’s living in the US Braille market. Nippon Telesoft on the other hand, makes Braille products itself and was therefore probably not as eager to sell its cells to a competitor company.

Special Education in Japan

I gathered information about special education in Japan by researching journals and articles about education in Japan. I searched for news articles and looked at Japanese government websites.  

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105 The Japanese language leaves room for this: Apart from the Chinese characters, Japanese has two alphabets, one for indigenous words, and one for foreign words, used as a phonetic transcription system.

106 MEXT: Japanese ministry of Education, culture, sport, science and technology.

http://www.mext.go.jp/english/
Ishikawa Jun (石川順) is the president of the Japanese corporation EXTRA. EXTRA is a company that distributes hardware and software for people with a visual impairment in Japan. Ishikawa is also the president of the Japanese center for the blind and a direct advisor to the Japanese prime minister about special education policies. EXTRA had been helping HumanWare with the Japanese version of various products such as the VR Stream and the Classmate and will help HumanWare with distributing and promoting its products in Japan.

Although Ishikawa speaks good English, HumanWare wanted me to talk to him in Japanese in order to find out more about him, his goals with EXTRA and the general situation concerning special education in Japan. Though they had been working with him for over several months, they had little knowledge about him and his company.

Together with Ivan Lagacé, VP Marketing at HumanWare we talked about a list of topics to discuss in my conversations with Ishikawa and a strategy to do so. After a few introductory topics, the questions mainly revolved around a marketing strategy for the HumanWare products and information about government funding. It was my job to translate our topic based conversations into strict fact-based reports on marketing strategy and funding.

I knew that in Japan business can never be too direct. In my conversations with Jun, I tried to ease in to these topics above, by simply showing general interest in his work. When we first talked, I started out by letting him know who I was and why I had studied Japanese. I also let him know that I had visited Japan and stayed with Japanese host families. This way I hoped to gain his trust. Jun is a very gentle enthusiastic man, and whenever he was talking technical details in Japanese, he made sure to repeat them slowly and even gave me a translation when he felt it was necessary.

My first goal was to find out more about Jun himself, what he does and what position he is in. The fact that I was speaking Japanese was apparently a catalyst, because I was getting quite quick responses to questions otherwise remained unanswered. I found out that Jun was the president of the Japanese center for the blind, and in theory his wife is president of the company; because Jun can’t be biased since he had an advisor position with the government.  

national association of the blind, and as president, he acted as personal informer to the Japanese prime minister on matters of the blind. This information was naturally of high importance at HumanWare; Jun had the power to advise HumanWare products to the Japanese government.

As written above, the Japanese government plans on investing money in special education. However, the government has not decided yet how to distribute the funding and how much funding will be available for products for the blind, people with low vision and learning disabilities.

I was also in charge of asking Jun how he was going to handle the marketing of our products in Japan. He told me that his company EXTRA would serve as an in-between dealer between HumanWare and Japanese resellers. He is trying find resellers all over Japan, but since there are some Japanese companies who already have a big market share, this takes time. Towards the end of my internship, Jun wrote a marketing plan for the HumanWare staff, and ordered a number of HumanWare products to be resold in Japan.

### 3.1.2. Project and Cross-Cultural Communication

During my conversations with these Japanese businesses and people, I tried to apply the knowledge I had about Japan and communication to the conversations. I encountered some cultural differences which I tried to handle by using Hofstede’s dimensions and of course, some common sense. Although the cultures are still very different, I find that as a Belgian, it is easier for me to communicate with Japanese as it is for North-Americans. Our way of expressing humility and respect is much closer to Japanese way than the American way is. For example, although we don’t have a similarly elaborate politeness system in our language, Belgians are much less direct than Americans and have a better feel for implicit language, or so is my feeling and personal experience. Hofstede also recognizes these similarities in his cultural dimensions; Belgium has an even higher power distance than Japan and scores as well very high in uncertainty avoidance. During the communications, I tried to bear in mind the theory and accounted for the cultural differences between Japan and Belgium as well as the corporate and personal differences.

### 3.2. SECONDARY PROJECTS

Apart from helping HumanWare out in the Japanese market, I was part of the marketing department and assisted in day to day communication related to the HumanWare website and external communication.
3.2.1. External Communication: Press Releases

During my internship, I had the opportunity to work with the communication coordinator, Audrey Fréchette, and work on press releases and communication plans for HumanWare. Whenever a press release needed to be written, I was briefed on the goal of the release and asked to write a draft. Together with the coordinator, Audrey Fréchette, we reviewed the press releases in order to work out the final release.

These tasks started with a small website announcement. During the month of July, the Toronto office was changing address. Stephan Lessard asked me to quickly draw up an announcement for the relocation to put up on the company website. Therefore I researched other relocation announcements on the web and I looked at the style of other announcements on the HumanWare website. This announcement was placed on the website almost completely unchanged and I was soon asked to write some other drafts on press releases.

The second press release I was asked to write was about Dr. Samuel Genensky, the inventor of the close caption TV. To commemorate his death, two HumanWare products were given to youngsters with Low Vision in the United States. The two SmartView Versa’s were given by the CCLVI (The Council of Citizens with Low Vision International). In the briefing I heard that the CCLVI wanted the article to be in Dr. Genensky’s honor and they needed to approve the article before it went online. I started by looking up information on Samuel Genensky on the CCLVI website and the internet in general. I also sent an e-mail to Ed Wikdall and Rich Sundemier, both director of sales in the US in order to receive the application forms the winners sent in. Since they had personally offered the tools to the two kids, I also asked them if they could tell me their reaction and some personal information which I could not get from the application form and send me some pictures. My first draft was reviewed by Ed Wikdall and afterwards, the CCLVI boilerplate was added and some additional information was put in.

I was also asked to write a promotional article which was sent out through the HumanWare database in an e-mail blast and also put up on the HumanWare website. In order to boost sales, the VP Marketing decided to send out a promotion that gave away a SmartView Pocket with each purchase of a SmartView Pocket.

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109 See appendix 4
Synergy. For this article, I used the information I had gathered at the training day and I tried to stay in touch with the promotional style of previous HumanWare articles. I split the article up in two parts with each a subtitle. The first part I talked about the functional benefits of the main product, the SmartView Synergy and in the second part I wrote what they would gain extra with the free pocket magnifier. In the last sentence of the article I refer to the company slogan, ‘Regain Independence’, in order to make the promotion a part of the bigger HumanWare goal.

During the World Cup Football in South-Africa this summer, the FIFA organization and two organizations for the blind (South African National Council for the Blind and the Swiss Association for the Blind) joined forces in making the World Cup available for people with a visual impairment. They did this by providing live audio descriptions for people in the stadia. The visually impaired could enjoy the ambience in the stadium and follow the game as it was going on. HumanWare bought a couple of tickets to hand out to South-African Football fans and they asked me to write about it for the website.

I received the information for the articles through the Europe VP, Pedro Polson; He is on good terms with the South African National Council for the Blind and is constantly in contact with them. He gave me a well pointed direction for the general article on HumanWare sponsoring the world cup and provided me the information about the tickets HumanWare bought. For other information, I looked at the FIFA website, which had a special section for this new feature.110 After the first article, I updated the link with experiences of the people that got the tickets.

The US is HumanWare’s biggest market, however, their market share in the States is very small. To upgrade this, HumanWare is constantly looking for new ways to reach its target audience. Therefore, HumanWare wants to reach the elderly, which often suffer from Low Vision, and they decided to send out post-card to assisted living facilities in five States.111 Accompanying the postcard, which were sent directly to the living facilities, was a press release, sent out to the local newspapers of the states in question.

I found this press release the hardest to write of all. The reason for this was that there was simply no news to be told. My job was basically to turn an advertisement around in order for it to be picked up by

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110 [http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/organisation/media/newsid=1231378/index.html](http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/organisation/media/newsid=1231378/index.html)

111 Pensylvania, (North and South) Carolina, Virginia, New England and New Jersey
newspapers and printed for free. I tried to appeal to the general public in this article by talking about the realities of Low Vision in the everyday life of people. I was instructed first to talk about the instruments HumanWare was going to promote at these facilities, and I made an attractive lay-out for the release. However, I was told to keep the lay-out simple, since it would not be picked up by newspapers that way. Dominic Gagliano, a sales VP in the US told us to take out the product descriptions as well, as he figured it sounded too much like an advertisement. Although Audrey and me did our very best to make the article sound like news, this is the piece of work I am the least satisfied with, and I’m sure hardly any newspapers picked up on it.

3.2.2. Low Vision Teaser Campaign

When the new VP of Marketing arrived, he decided to put a new effort in boosting the Low Vision market. In the Spring of 2010, a study was conducted by SAINE Marketing for HumanWare, in order to assess the current and future Low Vision market in the US. Based on this study, he asked me and Audrey to set up a plan for a teaser campaign, which leads to the introduction of a new handheld magnifier. We set up the idea of writing three press releases, built up in crescendo and each hinting towards the launch of a new product. This new magnifier itself will be launched by the end of the fall, 2010.

I started out by analyzing the SAINE Marketing report and picking out the main goals HumanWare ambitioned through this campaign. From there on, I researched information outside of the report. I looked for specific data on Low Vision on statistical websites, such as statistics Canada and the Census Bureau in the US, and various recognized health institutions, such as the World Health organization, The National Eye Institute and Lighthouse International. I first made a document in which all the usable data was gathered. Then I made a plan for each press release, writing the big lines of each of the Press releases.

The first press release is set up as an explanatory press release about low vision and is filled with general data on the Low Vision market. For example, by 2030 almost everyone in the USA will either be

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112 See Appendix 5
113 http://www.sainemarketing.com/en/firme/
114 http://www.statcan.gc.ca/
115 http://www.census.gov/
personally affected by Low Vision, or have a close relative or friend affected by it. The second Press release is rather human focused, explaining the consequences and the hindrances of Low Vision. The last Press Release is product oriented and explains the best tools to live independently with Low Vision, putting handheld magnifiers on the top.

In order to get a feel of how the three press releases would be structured and presented, I then placed all the information I gathered under its respective press release and sub goal of each press release. Together with Audrey, we already conceived titles for each article. This plan was presented to the VP, but it will only have to be approved by the US team by September.

3.2.3. Website Development: My Dream Classroom

In the recent months before I arrived at HumanWare, they started up a new website, built for teachers and educators in the US and Canada. This website is called “My Dream Classroom”, and shows all HumanWare’s products that can be used for students. The project is co-organized by partners of HumanWare, such as Bookshare.org and Intel®.

The graphics were already done when I arrived, but the text was simply taken from the products’ website. Stephan Lessard asked me to rewrite all the product descriptions and give a more personal touch to it. I gave all the children in the classroom a name and talked about their ‘personal’ situation and how the tool on their desk helps them to integrate in the school and have an more comfortable life in general.

After writing up the different descriptions I made a few suggestions to Stephan of which the most were executed. I told him it would be good do have a widget on our general website and the website of our partners. Although we couldn’t place it on our home page – it can’t be read by the blind and that’s a house-rule– we placed it on the product pages and the icon was sent to our partners as well. Secondly, I proposed to have the teacher state an introductory paragraph, explaining what the website is about and how to use it, all in the theme of school-education. Thirdly, by browsing to it, I noticed that additional information and partner information pages opened in the same tab, which made the user loose the

117 See appendix 6
Classroom page every time he clicked on something. These two things were also put in place and to my opinion, completed the user friendliness of the website.
4. IN RETROSPECTION

In this chapter, I wish to look back on the past year of MBC and my traineeship, and take a look at what I’ve learned in the professional and personal sphere. Overall I had a wonderful experience both this year and at HumanWare. I have learned and applied a tremendous amount of information and skills which are very valuable for my future life and career.

Since I did my internship in a bilingual English-French community, I obviously practiced the languages I elaborated during the MBC program. My day to day conversations were almost completely in English and since I constantly worked for the US Market, so were the external communications. General internal communication however was often in French and e-mails were often in the two languages. Although I did not speak any Dutch, it did come in handy once when I was asked to evaluate the Dutch version of the VR Stream. The nature of the company opened a complete new range of information for me. It was very interesting to take a look behind the scenes of a company that serves a particular niche market like HumanWare does. The people at HumanWare made me feel like I was really part of the team, working with me as a regular colleague and this made the experience all the better.

I enjoyed almost all of my tasks, like writing the press releases, and all the other smaller tasks I executed. Communicating with Japan enabled me to stay true to my first field of study and this made the traineeship all the more interesting and valuable. Furthermore, it also gave me my subject for this dissertation.

Various classes in the MBC program were useful to me at my internship. I learnt a great deal from the business communication in English classes: The various writing exercises we had to do were very practical and greatly helped me in writing the press releases at HumanWare. When I was writing for the My Dream Classroom website, I kept in mind the lessons about direct mailing and tried to personally grab the reader. The website exercise we had to perform on Midas for Mr vande Graveele also gave me ideas for the website I was working on at HumanWare and put me in the possibility of evaluating and enhancing it with different ideas.
Further, the practical French lessons we had helped me a great deal getting around in the company. The vocabulary we saw was extremely useful to me – Even the vocabulary about cheques, because they still exist in Canada! – and I got to use it quite often. Even though Montreal is a bilingual city, most of the people are native speakers of French and have English as a second language. Often I was asked for quick advice on grammatical issues or expressions in English.

In my opinion, Multilingual Business Communication is an excellent preparation for the professional world. This winter, I visited the Japanese corporation Yamagata Europe in Ghent. This was organized by the student circle of Japanese science in Ghent and one of the participants asked what it took for someone with our background to get a job at the company. The spokesperson answered that they should at least have a basic idea of marketing, know how to write a marketing communication plan and a business plan; These are all things we had to learn and do this year. In that respect, I highly value the practical approach which MBC takes. The emphasis lies on do rather than on study, which makes the experiences much more concrete, but it still always has a good theoretical backbone. As I’ve written in the theoretical part (Uncertainty avoidance), overall, Belgians like to be guided all the way and like to be told exactly what to do. However, this is not always a good quality in the professional world where people are expected to work on themselves. During my internship as well, I often got vague descriptions of what I needed to do, but the various projects we had to deliver during the year had taught me that I was able to do these things without someone explaining every step of the way; Just by using common sense I was able to correctly complete these tasks. This is a quality which I’m very grateful for, since I know it will aid me in all areas of my life.

Another thing I learned from the program is that form and content go hand in hand. During the program, I was constantly pushed to think about lay-out and formatting more than I had ever done in previous projects. I have gathered a lot of tips from co-students and this year has even driven me to learn how to work with programs such as Photoshop, a skill that I already used during my internship and that I’m sure I will use for the rest of my life.

During the program however, I sometimes lacked some feedback after a project was done. I never got feedback on almost all the papers I handed in. We often got comments on a presentation, but I think the experience would have been even more meaningful had we gotten a review on the written information
as well. I’m sure that in regard to style, wording, and content, there was much to approve in all of our papers and that would have helped me even further in the professional world.

Secondly I felt like some of our professors were not on par with each other. The professors and lecturers we had were very skilled on their own, but not aligned to one another. One class we were told to do things one way, the other we were called on it and told that was rather ‘not-done’. These situations gave me a more reticent attitude towards some of the classes, but in the end I simply drew a conclusion from it; it taught me that one opinion is just one opinion, I should do what works best for me and my company and that I shouldn’t take bad reviews as personal as I did before.

As I said in the beginning of this dissertation, I have not regretted doing the MBC program for one second and I’m very grateful for what the classes and the lectures have taught me. I am certain that I will be able to apply all the knowledge I was given in my professional career and my personal life. The MBC program has helped me to find the way to my future life and has given me a wonderful last year as a student.


Groupe HumanWare: Qui sommes-nous? (Company Brochure)


WEBSITES

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PRESS RELEASES

– TORONTO OFFICE RELOCATION
– HUMANWARE DONATES TWO SMARTVIEW VERSA’S TO HONOR DR. SAM GENENSKY
– BUY A SMARTVIEW SYNERGY AND GET A SMARTVIEW POCKET FOR FREE
– HUMANWARE JOINS THE WORLD CUP FEVER
– HUMANWARE PRODUCTS ENHANCING EVERYDAY-LIFE FOR SIGHT CHALLENGED CITIZENS (FIRST DRAFT)
– HUMANWARE AIDS TO ENHANCE EVERYDAY-LIFE FOR SIGHT-CHALLENGED CITIZENS OF NORTH AND SOUTH CAROLINA (FINAL DRAFT)
– HUMANWARE ASSISTS LOW VISION TRAINING IN PACIFIC ISLAND SCHOOLS
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Appendix 6:

Website My Dream Classroom

- Previous Product Descriptions
- New Product Descriptions
- My Dream Classroom ‘Choose Your Classroom’
- Welcome Message
- Product Description Example: VR Stream