

INTERNATIONAL PROJECT and EDUCATION COOPERATION EXPERIENCE
WITH
ALEXANDRIA UNIVERSITY in EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

In October 1998, the Foreign Relations Coordination Unit of the Supreme Council of Universities in Egypt awarded a three (3) year University Linkage Grant, No. 93/02.19, to Southern University in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

Through this collaborative effort, these two Universities have explored opportunities for organizing technical workshops and seminars in the United States and in Egypt. Five (5) technical papers co-authored by faculty members from both Universities were presented and published in the United States and Internationally.

Southern University and Alexandria University are proposing to establish a Cooperative Agreement designed to promote higher education in the areas of academic, culture, and personnel exchange. This endeavor will be a mutual benefit in building the cultural competency of both Universities.

Additionally, this paper will highlight experiences that address issues such as, cultural differences, communication skills, project management and other related areas that will enhance a more comprehensive and productive relationship.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on the authors' experience with an International Cooperative Project entitled "Scheduling of Computer-Based Preventive Maintenance in Egypt-ANDSK using Computer Based on-line Monitoring Network" between Southern University in US and Alexandria University in Egypt. This project is funded under the USAID University Linkage II Program with the Supreme Council of Universities in Egypt.

This program required that a common research interest exist among the universities within the United States with funding to be divided equally between five Universities. I was surprised that this project was awarded funding within one month after we submitted our research background documents. I was equally surprised that the implementation of this award took place for five years.

I first met with the Egyptian Principal Investigator on December 3, 1993 to sign the contract. The project was not implemented until October 30, 1998. During the waiting period, I was informed that their selection of Su was based on my publication entitled "Vibration Diagnostic Analysis as part of Energy Audit and Energy Management Application" and our newly established Vibration Laboratory.

I also was informed that the budget was mis-managed by the Egyptian agency. USAID tracked all the Linkage funds. The remainder of this paper will address issues that impact greatly to our project from 10/30/98 to 3/31/00.

CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Engineering faculty and students experience cross cultural practice, education, and research opportunities that challenge our minds and are otherwise out of reach through the US/Egypt collaborative efforts.

Culture is a major emphasis throughout the country now, usually in the sense of cultural diversity. Diversity denotes a way of thinking, and a world view that not only tolerates but values differences. It was important for the purpose of the US/Egypt collaborative effort to understand that attitudes toward culture 1) are learned and can develop toward maturity, and 2) are multiple, not singular, in their expression.

Cognitive development is the progress from: 1) dualism - view the world in polarities and absolutes -we/they, Black/White, good/bad, (may limit one's openness to assessment of alternatives), to 2) multiplicity - views stemming from fact, opinion, and individual preferences, (requires questioning the validity of dualistic views, to 3) relativism - puts situations in context with alternative interpretations of any given set of questions.

There are three main groups of Muslims: Sunnis, Shi'as and Abadites, with several sub-divisions. It is very important that both the host team and the visiting team recognize the need to practice cultural sensitivity toward cultural norms in the social status, education, business, communication, religious, and eating practices of the other country.

Religion - There are five daily services of worship in the Muslim and Islamic religious practices that are obligatory. The second one is replaced every Friday by a solemn congregational service (there is no work on Friday). Each service is different in length. For the prayer, a Muslim must be in a state of purity, so he washes himself in a particular way. The practice of these worship times did not pose a great problem to our Egyptian visitors.

If a person should speak to anybody during the service, let out wind, laugh aloud, eat or drink anything, this annuls the service. It is expected that the person behaves with dignity, concentration and remain firm. They should never look toward the sky, left or right but toward the spot where one is going to place his forehead. The host university should be cognizant of these practices and at the request of the Egyptian researchers, make every effort to allow for their practices.

Food - Pork, (flesh and fat) is forbidden in all its forms, in the same way as alcoholic drinks. A misunderstanding requires to be dissipated. They cannot consume animals or birds not ritually slaughtered. Their main meal consists of rice, ful beans, and vegetables. A special occasion dish is fattah prepared with layers of bread, rice and meat seasoned with vinegar and garlic and garnished with yogurt and nuts.

Rank Systems - The man is the authority in the home and society. A woman must yield to the guardianship of the man. According to Muhammad 'Abduh, he states that guardianship has four elements: protection, surveillance, custody, and maintenance. Above all these elements, is the element of obedience. There has been some suggestion that there is a class status difference not only among women but men of academic and financial limitations.

General Practices - Egyptians prefer the right side. When putting on sandals the right foot is first, the left one afterwards, and just the contrary when putting them off. When putting on a shirt the right arm is first followed by the left arm, the right side of the head is combed first, then the left. However when entering a house or mosque, the right foot is first. Then the left, however when entering the bathroom or water closet, the left foot is first and when exiting the right foot is first. When taking off clothing the left arm or foot is first followed by the right.

Many times food is eaten with out knives and forks. The use of gold and silver plates and utensils for food is forbidden. Men are forbidden the use of cloth made entirely with silk and also garments of a red color.

Project habits- In this modern 21st Century, you may have a difficult time accepting the fact that express mail takes more than 3 weeks to deliver form the US to Egypt. Some times it is not uncommon for the express package to get lost. The E-mail and FAX systems are the best solutions. Most Egyptian researchers speak excellent English. We had no experience of language barriers interacting during project management.

However, there is a major difference when it comes to addressing the budget and other expenditures. Our US team budgetary process is based on incurred and reimbursement payments. However, the Egyptian budget system is based on cash advancements.

Therefore, Egyptians are used to spending most of their budgets at the very beginning of the project period. Based on their view, the project progress is based on the figures appearing on the balance sheet. In the US, dollar amounts that appear in an account is already spent or accounted for, because the process for showing the actual balance is very slow. Egyptians also, have difficulty understanding why there is no advanced payment arrangement. As you know in the US we have to work before we are awarded a payment.

Our Egyptian researchers love to travel to the US. They come in groups and stay for about a week. They expect the host team to treat during every meal. I was shocked to learn that the Egyptian PI's spent more than five thousand dollars during their trip to the US on 12/3/1993. I compared this with my trip to Egypt on 12/12/1998 when I spent only twenty-five hundred dollars.

Communication - The Egyptian language consist of the Coptic and Arabic, however they are English speakers. Therefore communicating with them relative to programmatic matters was not a problem. The observance and respect of practices of the Egyptian culture enhances a warm, cooperative and productive environment.

We have found that when we display elements of respect regarding differences we generate an atmosphere of trust. Therefore, all our energies are directed toward the same outcome.

One might ask, is working toward cultural competency worth the effort? The answers is consider the consequences of isolation, homogeneity and other barriers. Multi-cultural communication not only opens the door for both cultural and intellectual enrichment, but is the reality for the future and the exciting challenge and opportunity for the presence.

CONCLUSION

International Projects provides numerous benefits by being part of such an ambitious nationwide movement as published by many International programs. However, a successful International Cooperative program should not only be the adjustment of the culture difference for both sides.

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