

## INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS DISCOURSE: CHARACTERISTICS OF KAZAKH CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Many cross-cultural business interactions are often a source of cultural misinterpretations and misconceptions. Typically each party uses native strategies to communicate across groups. Different cultures also use their own methods to interpret verbal and non-verbal messages. Therefore, developing a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communicational preferences is critical for any successful international business venture, which stems active research interest in this area. This article, in particular, focuses on a comparative analysis of Kazakh business communication style against different established communication patterns across the globe. This includes the discussion on tendency towards collective culture within Kazakh community with resulting implications on importance of space and privacy, relational and collaborative business inclinations, and intuitive communication style preference. The article also covers the significance of age and preferences. Finally, we explain cultural roots for preferred communication channels, directness, writing clarity and conciseness in Kazakh business discourse. Often it is the historical developments of the community that shape the mentality, styles of spoken and written communication, as well as methods of assessing messages from other cultures. These trends are demonstrated on the development of modern Kazakh business discourse preferences and traits. Overall, we show that it is not only important to be aware of differences in cultural communication conceptions, but it is even more important to recognize them and place messages in the right cultural contexts. This work aims to present a well-rounded overview of Kazakh business discourse preferences, serving as a guideline for cross-cultural business communication as well as an important contributing piece to the field of intercultural studies.

**Keywords:** Business Discourse, Intercultural Communication, Kazakh communication preferences.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in the era of instant communication, where internet and accessible international travels are pushing numbers of cross cultural interactions to historically unprecedented frequencies. These interactions can often

result in cultural appropriation, as for example adoption of Christmas celebrations in China, Japan, and Korea. At the same time, cross cultural exchange frequently opens new international business opportunities. A striking example of such business ventures is the expansion of KFC to Japan, whose bucket of chicken is now exclusively linked to Christmas celebration in the country (Kimura & Belk, 2005, Liebheit, 2013). As the number of multinational companies and new international business ventures grows, so does the necessity to communicate more effectively across cultures.

As a result, intercultural business discourse is a subject of extensive research interest. While some authors take on business discourse research and exploration in a more global sense (Søderberg & Holden, 2002, Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2013, Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006), many others consider specific case studies of cross-cultural business interactions (Yamada, 1992, Yli-Jokipii, 1994, Park, W. Tracy, & Kenneth L., 1998). This paper provides a brief overview of business discourse in Kazakh context. In particular, we will discuss global cultural discourse trends and place Kazakh cultural preferences in that framework.

## 2. CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Majority of cultures across the globe can be roughly classified into either individualistic or collective culture groups (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011). Even though this classification is not absolute and some cultures might not fit the description of either, it is a useful exercise to discuss typical characteristics of individualistic and collective cultures before elaborating on specifics of Kazakh society.

**In individualistic cultures** people are brought up to be independent of one another. This means that each person is ultimately responsible for their own life decisions, and majority of the choices are made to benefit the individual. A typical characteristic of an individualistic culture is that individual needs and rights are more important than needs of the group. Therefore, in majority of western cultures (e.g. North America and Europe) key professional and personal life choices, like selection of marriage partners and selection of profession, are ultimately made independently by each person (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011).

Space and privacy have great value in individualistic cultures. This can be readily observed in a typical arrangement home and office spaces. Even though couples would normally share a bedroom, each individual would aim to have a personal 'corner' inside the house. As a result, garage spaces and basements are often arranged into offices or craft rooms. In the office environment, private offices are preferred to cubical arrangements. People place great value on personal space and time. Majority of business meetings are arranged in advance and unannounced office visits are rarely encouraged. Typical examples of unspoken rules in individualistic office environment would include the following. A closed office door means that a person does not wish to be disturbed at the moment, and people typically do not initiate business discourse in office hallways. Entering an office without knocking is frowned upon.

Individualistic cultures are often associated with result driven business style, and therefore quantifying success in profit, efficiency, and market value is a common practice. A business decision are typically assessed quantitatively, and whenever a new business venture or collaboration is being agreed upon, the deal is only considered binding after legal paperwork is signed. Business and personal relationships are kept separate, and this principle is imbedded in the very definition of professionalism in individualistic cultures. Personal relationships are seen as obstacles to unbiased professional judgment, and can even be viewed as a cause for conflict of interests. Hence, co-workers rarely establish close friendships and socialize with each other only occasionally, maintaining cordial business relationships.

**Collective cultures**, on the other hand, place greater importance on groups rather than individuals. *Members of collective cultures see themselves as elements in a closely-knit network with others; they are part of a strong cohesive unit (family, clan, profession, corporation, religion) that protects and supports them throughout their lives in exchange for their loyalty* (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011). As a result, all major personal decisions would be made after consulting the group at large. For example, family is often heavily involved in selection of marriage partners – in countries like India, Bangladesh, Mongolia and Uzbekistan arranged marriages are common place.

Personal relations are valued well above privacy and personal space both at home and in office environments. It is common for people to live in extended families, and there seems to be less emphasis on having private rooms. In the office environment, private offices are not always favoured and people tend to work in open group stations. As a result, discussing business matters in hallways and public spaces is common place, and unannounced work visits are not discouraged.

In collective cultures, personal relationships can be valued more than quantitative data in making business decisions. Even though numerical data is not ignored when building business arguments, it is also important who the argument is coming from. A great deal of emphasis can be placed on loyalty and trust when making decisions.

**Kazakh culture** was built upon a long standing nomadic history and lifestyle. People traditionally lived in close groups and extended families, which moved throughout the year to maintain large numbers of livestock. The biggest challenge to a traditional nomadic culture was overcoming difficulties posed by the harsh climate of Central Asia. Therefore, the society was built in such a way that each individual played well defined roles in the community as a whole. As a result, Kazakh culture shares a lot of common attributes with the collective cultures.

Much alike to collective cultures, Kazakh individuals have a strong sense of 'face' or personal dignity. As a result, many of the personal life choices are often weighed against public opinion. This includes both professional choices as well as personal ones like selection of marriage partners. In particular, it is a common practice to consult on major decisions with Elders, who traditionally hold a special role within the community. In Kazakhstan, age is a symbol of wisdom. Advanced age of a person earns special respect. We consider that there are a lot of things to be learnt from elder people. Their life experience is worth of sharing. The elders' advice is a pearl of wisdom.

At the same time, there are a few attributes that Kazakh society shares with individualistic cultures as well. For example, there is a preference for private space both at home and offices. Private offices are considered a reflection of status. Furthermore, similarly to individualistic cultures, each individual is expected to speak for themselves and speak freely. This comes from the fact that historically Kazakh community would elect their clan leaders and representatives to the judicial systems, and people traditionally enjoyed the freedom of speech. However, the freedom of speech was practiced more by respected elderly population, rather than youth.

*Roots make trees strong; friends make people strong* – is a Kazakh proverb that highlights the importance of personal relations in business interactions. This is another attribute that Kazakh culture shares with the collective culture group. Building trust and loyalty with business partners and co-workers is a crucial part of business interactions. Decisions often take into account not only the immediate benefits but also long term goals and implications on personal-professional relations. As a result, it is a common practice for business partners and co-workers to socialize outside professional environments. For example, people often invite professional connections to their home for dinner in order to establish trusting bonds.

### 3. WRITING COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

Even though majority of written business communication is conducted in English, differences in writing styles across cultures can be significant. While some cultures prefer clear and direct messages, others consider them impolite and adhere to more indirect communication style in writing. Therefore, understanding these communicational preferences can be crucial in having productive business interactions across cultures.

The very structure of English writing, where thesis statements declare main messages in letters and passages, is built around delivering information directly. Getting right to the point is considered a good writing style, and often an indication of openness, sincerity, and clear thinking. Fundamental blocks of a letter written in English are introduction, body, and conclusion. Introductory paragraphs and sections necessarily state the main purpose of writing and often provide synopsis for the upcoming sections and paragraphs. Body paragraphs are typically reserved to qualitative and factual support to the main message and often include examples and more detailed explanations. Conclusion of written communication reiterates the main message and highlights main supporting information.

There are a few more traits of English writing that is important to note. Use of passive voice is typically avoided; passive voice is often associated with the lack of conviction in the message. Moreover, English writers are more inclined to using "I" in their writing rather than "we". This is related to the sense of accountability for the message.

Although, most of professionals in Kazakh community are fairly comfortable with written English, indirect messages are prevalent in written business discourse. Since relationships are valued highly in the professional environment, letters often start with courtesy messages and seemingly unrelated information. Similarly to many other eastern cultures, Kazakh writers often feel the need to include background information and context before delivering the main message. Therefore, letters typically have the structure that carries more weight towards the end of the written communication.

Furthermore, a Kazakh writer would often be inclined to using passive voice in written discourse. "We" would be often used instead of "I", conveying a sense of collaborative inclusion.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Overall, Kazakh community can be classified into the collective cultural group like many other eastern cultures. Individuals in Kazakh culture maintain a strong sense of 'face', personal dignity, and respect for elders within the community. Business style is highly collaborative, with significant importance placed on developing and maintaining personal relationships. In writing, Kazakh writers prefer indirect messaging and use of passive voice. Even though, the study of cross cultural business discourse has been active for many decades now, comparative research of Kazakh business discourse is fairly new and needs further investigation.

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