

Chapter 2

Collaboration as a Process of Creolization at VanceInfo

2.1 Introduction

This section presents an analysis of the case study using the analytical framework of creolization (Abbott et al. 2013). The arguments establishing the creolization framework are mostly repeated from Abbott et al. with some slight additions for this particular case. A more in-depth view of the conceptual underpinnings of this framework can be obtained from the original paper itself. Following the presentation of the conceptual basis of the analytical framework and its composition, the case analysis is presented. A discussion of the analysis presented in this chapter and those of Chaps. 3 and 4 will be presented in Chap. 5.

2.2 Analytical Framework: Creolization

2.2.1 *The Problem with Boundary Spanning*

The performance of distributed global projects is often contingent on the achievement of sufficient mutual cultural understanding, which provides the basis of trust, knowledge sharing, and smooth collaboration. Previous work on globally distributed work that looks at cross-cultural issues (Gregory et al. 2009; Krishna et al. 2004) identifies the role of individuals who serve as points of contact between the two organisational groups, referred to as cultural liaisons (Krishna et al. 2004), onsite coordinators (Carmel 2006) or expatriate managers (Levina and Kane 2009). The responsibilities of the individual or role include bridging cultural disparities,

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managing communication between sites, helping to develop the onsite-offsite relationship and facilitating knowledge exchange. These activities are usually referred to as boundary-spanning (Gopal and Gosain 2013; Levina and Kane 2009).

While concepts like “boundary spanning” or “bridging” have been useful in theorizing about cross-cultural collaborations in offshore outsourcing processes, they are also limited by their emphasis on boundaries, separation of identity, and imagery associated with geographical dispersion such as bridges spanning wide gulfs (see also Yagi and Kleinberg’s 2011 analysis of the terms). Moreover, the majority of literature on boundary spanning has focused on individual qualities, capabilities and identity, with insufficient attention paid to the organisational, inter-organisational and international levels. In general, the literature on globally distributed work has not sufficiently accounted for the complexities of intercultural collaboration inherent within these arrangements (Hinds et al. 2011).

The concept of boundary suggests “a sharp line of demarcation”, a breakdown or discontinuity of “cultural flows” (Hannerz 1992, p. 7). It can be argued that notions like boundary spanning or bridging reify the distinction and separation of two or more cultural territories that can be artificially connected by agents such as members of a Diaspora or expatriate managers. This is not to say that boundaries do not exist—the critical point is that these boundaries are not necessarily “spanned” or “bridged”; they are socially constructed and often contested, negotiated, broken down, reconfigured, or perhaps reinforced.

Therefore, instead of looking at cross-boundary knowledge transfer, we consider the practices of organizational learning as a whole, namely, across different analytical levels of the individual, intra-organizational, inter-organizational and international. Moreover, our research takes a network perspective where the firm is viewed as situated, and has to constantly monitor and reconfigure its position in a global value network across time and space. Drawing upon a wide range of literature from cultural studies, international business, human resource management, organizational capabilities and innovation, while comparing and theorizing from our empirical data, we propose a creolization approach of organisational learning, which we argue could be critical for firms seeking to grow and innovate in the global network economy.

What is proposed here is to move beyond the notion of linkage or crossing boundaries between two separate territories to the idea of a process of “creolization”. The Oxford English dictionary links the term “Creole” to the Latin word “creare”, which means “to create”. Originally referring to the intermingling and mixing of different ethnic groups in colonized societies, the term was adopted and developed in linguistics and anthropology to study respectively “creole languages” and “creole cultures” (Hannerz 1992).

Creole cultures — like creole languages — are intrinsically of mixed origin, the confluence of two or more widely separated historical currents which interact in what is basically a center/periphery relationship. [However,] the cultural processes of creolization are not simply a matter of constant pressure from the center toward the periphery, but a much more creative interplay. [...] Creole cultures come out of multi-dimensional cultural encounters and can put things together in new ways (Hannerz 1992, pp. 264–265).

Within the context of globalization, creolization describes the encounter and the interaction between, and the disjuncture and the assimilation of, cultures across time and

space. The notion of creolization counterbalances the popular discourse of globalization as economic and cultural homogenization, which suggests a global culture imposing itself onto local contexts (Leidner 2010). Instead, creolization describes the confluence space between cultures as “vital, diverse, innovative” (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002). There has also been a related and persistent “convergence-divergence” debate in the cross-cultural management literature (McGaughey and Cieri 1999; Van den Berghe 2002). The convergence perspective envisages that a universal value system prevails driven by, for instance, the expansion of Western capitalism, while the divergence perspective focuses on the polarization and conflicts of ideologies and cultures. This dichotomous view of opposing processes is rigid and reductive. Chan et al. (2005) extend the convergence theory to reflect instead a process of “cultural hybridization”, and propose the idea of the “contact zone” or a “mixed system” which is “a ‘space’ constrained by inequality and contradictions, but ... also capable of being seen as the ‘spatial’ and ‘temporal’ co-presence and co-adaptation of various cultural sub-jects previously separated by geopolitical and historical disjunctures” (pp. 479–480).

“Hybridity” reflects the reality of a globalized world where there is “a gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences” (Geertz 1988, p. 148), in contrast to a world where clear boundaries become “objects of reification and power hegemony”. There has therefore been a move in cultural studies beyond notions of separateness into hybridity (Ang 2003). As (Felski 1997, p. 12) argues:

Metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections between subjects by recognizing affiliations, cross-pollinations, echoes and repetitions, thereby unseating difference from a position of absolute privilege. Instead of endorsing a drift towards ever greater atomization of identity, such metaphors allow us to conceive of multiple, interconnecting axes of affiliation and differentiation.

The creolization approach thus stems from the increasing entanglement of global and local networks, cultures, knowledge and resources in distributed work processes. Most importantly, creolization is a purposive yet situated and agile approach to enhance organizational learning positioned not in a linear value chain but a dispersed, interconnected value network. New combinations of knowledge are related to the emergence of innovation, and thus to the creation of value, which is linked to a firm’s strategic positioning in a value network or constellation. Normann and Ramirez (1993) suggest the concept of the value chain is outdated and increasingly replaced by “value constellation” driven by global competition, changing markets and new technologies, which give rise to new modes of value creation. “*Their key strategic task is the reconfiguration of roles and relationships among this constellation of actors in order to mobilise the creation of value in new forms and by new players. And their underlying strategic goal is to create an ever-improving fit between competencies and customers*” (ibid., p. 1).

2.2.2 The Creolization Framework

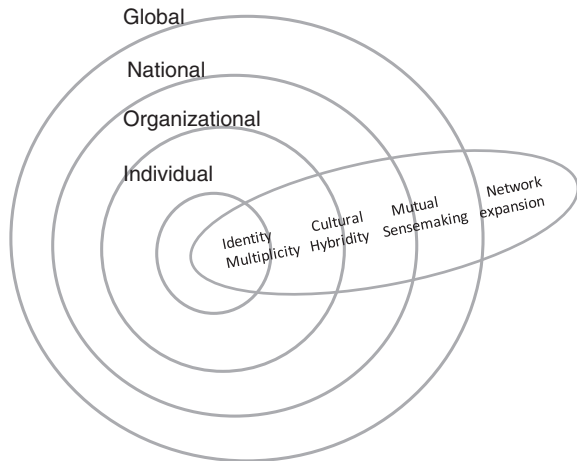
Creolization, reconceived from its original cultural and anthropological origins, is constructed here as encompassing four interconnected processes implicated in

the success of global sourcing ventures: *network expansion, mutual sensemaking, cultural hybridization and identity multiplicity*. It has been recognised that the complexities of cultural encounters in global software outsourcing can be conceptualised using multi-layered cultural lenses (D’Mello and Eriksen 2010). We thus draw upon Leung et al. (2005) who propose a multi-level, multi-layer model of culture, with both top-down and bottom-up processes shaping and reshaping the different levels. As shown in Fig. 2.1, the conceptualization of creolization is based on such a model and seeks to capture the multi-layered individual, intra- and inter-organisational as well as international dynamics implicated in the global sourcing phenomenon.

At the global level is the process of *network expansion*, which may not be explicit in the original concept of creolization but is an important extension, particularly in the context of offshore service providers. Network expansion refers to the generation and connection of what would otherwise be disparate networks. For example, Irish companies are found to adopt the role of a vendor for accessing offshoring work and to shift to that of a client for further subcontracting that work so as to take advantage of a unique geographical and economic advantage midway between US clients and Indian vendors (Olsson et al. 2008), thereby connecting and mobilising resources from two completely disparate networks.

One important role that creoles play in the processes of network expansion is that of “reputational intermediary” (Kapur and McHale 2005), i.e. being a proxy of reputational “capital” which the foreign offshore provider gains over time. With the knowledge and capabilities necessary to build the linkages between actors in adopted and home territories, they are able to build trust relationships when exploring and establishing local connections. Bridgeheads have been found to facilitate the building of relationships between foreign business entities and host country clients, to create access to host country markets and to acquire knowledge for capability building (Jensen 2009). Multiple networks are created, mobilized and joined together via the mediation of bridgeheads, or creoles or creolized sites (firms).

Fig. 2.1 Creolization as multi-layered processes across levels of culture. Reprinted by permission from Elsevier: Journal of Strategic Information Systems (Abbott et al. 2013), copyright (2013) published by Elsevier



At the inter-national and inter-organizational level is *mutual sensemaking*. There has been extensive discussion on cross-cultural knowledge transfer in the context of global sourcing (e.g. Gregory et al. 2009; Rottman 2008; Sarker 2005). However, the notion of objective or reified knowledge which can be transferred from one context to another, is inherently flawed; knowledge is difficult to share because it is embodied in social and cultural contexts (Marabelli and Newell 2012) and is a result of individual sensemaking. The boundaries between different cultures are inevitably blurred and dynamic where cross-cultural collaboration takes place. Thus, knowledge is constantly practiced by knowledgeable and reflexive agents who draw upon multiple sources of ideas, norms, cultural understanding and institutional rules in the constant process of sensemaking in cross-cultural collaboration. Creoles serve as “knowledge translators”, that is, mediators of ideas and knowledge, whose activities support, transport and transform knowledge across cultural contexts (Alvarez et al. 1998; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002). Through interaction and collaboration, the agents and members of local cultures build trust, affinity and “shared meaning” with each other. Furthermore, mutual sensemaking also facilitates strategic partnerships and creates potential opportunities for co-creation of value (Ngugi and Johnsen 2010; Vargo et al. 2008). This co-creation of value in client-vendor relationships is in contrast to the traditional model of offshored service provision established around pre-specified design and “doing as told” (Levina and Vaast 2008). It is achieved through extensive interactions between collaborators, or clients and vendors, with “the ultimate aim of co-designing and co-producing the next level of value for a product or a service” (Romero and Molina 2011).

At the organizational level is the notion of “*cultural hybridity*”. It refers to the cultural amalgamation of two or more sources into a new one which retains elements from the original cultures as well as new elements that emerge from such synthesis (Felski 1997). Generating a hybrid culture in the organization may involve accommodating national, industrial, corporate and local cultural elements from multiple social contexts. Chan et al. (2005), for example, talk about the “sinification of Western corporate culture” in sino-Western joint ventures, i.e. the appropriation of some aspects of local Chinese traditions into Western corporate culture, such as adapting Western management philosophy to accommodate Chinese Communist Party politics. Chan et al. (2005) also point out that the process of cultural hybridization is not conflict free but ambivalent and contested, yet it is often from the dialectic of conflict or collision that creativity emerges. Such hybridization, however, may not always be successful and produce positive synergies, and there are times when differences and conflicts fail to be resolved.

At the individual level is the idea of *identity multiplicity*, i.e. the ability to draw upon the norms and values of multiple cultures which originate in different social contexts and may be observed at levels spanning from individual to inter-national. It should be noted, though, that people with multiple cultural backgrounds or experience may not necessarily have this ability. Identity multiplicity is a characteristic of reflexive individuals in conditions imposed on society through the forces of globalisation and is particularly relevant in the highly complex environments of distributed

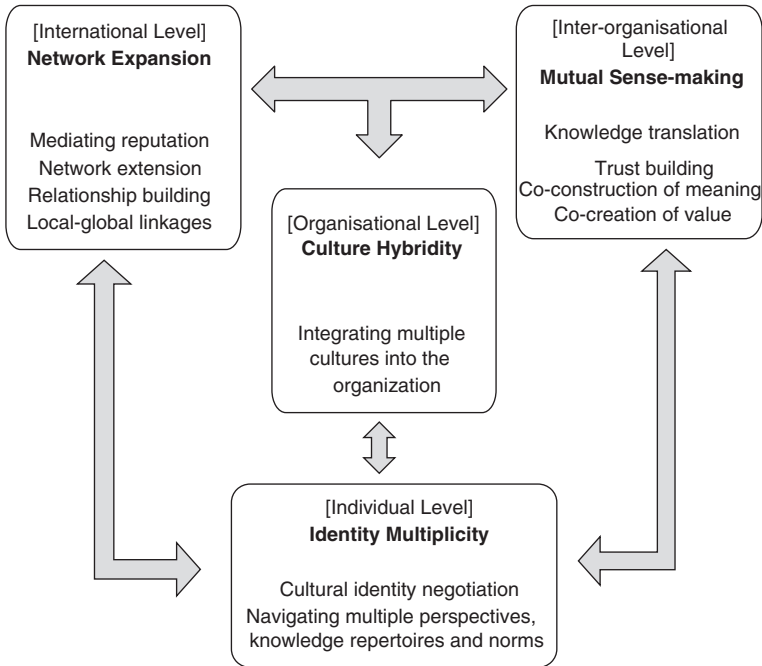


Fig. 2.2 The creolization framework. Reprinted by permission from Elsevier: Journal of Strategic Information Systems (Abbott et al. 2013), copyright (2013) published by Elsevier

global software work (D’Mello and Eriksen 2010; Sahay et al. 2003). The ability to operate at the interface of cultural groupings and negotiate a state of in-betweenness (Ang 2003) is key to creating and maintaining cross-cultural relationships, and is the defining characteristic of creole individuals. Creoles apply to local contexts the perspectives, abilities, and notions of image that are particular to the creole experience. *Identity multiplicity* is often a result of processes of acculturation (i.e. adopting social traits of another group) and assimilation (i.e. incorporating the norms and values of another social group into those of one’s own). Inherent to identity multiplicity are tensions inevitably arising from the pronounced “differences” in any cultural confrontation (D’Mello 2005), as well as the need to reconcile status differences (Levina and Vaast 2008) and disparities in power (Byun and Ybema 2005) present in cross-cultural collaborations. Note that immigrants are not by default able to adopt mixed identity. For example, Levina and Kane (2009), in the context of offshore outsourcing, point out that it is problematic for onshore immigrant managers to serve as bridgeheads if they do not identify with the offshore groups with whom they share ethnic origins. The tensions experienced by creoles and their consequences are complex and nuanced and call for better understanding.

In summary, creolization represents the complex inter-relationship of practices, perspectives and connections from the stance of offshore service providers (Fig. 2.2 illustrates this complexity). Table 2.1 summarizes the conceptual

Table 2.1 The conceptual underpinnings of the creolization framework

Underlying concepts of creolization	Description of underlying concepts as they relate to cross-cultural work	Level of analysis
Network expansion	Mediating reputation, network extension, relationship building, creating local-global linkages	Inter-national
Mutual sensemaking	Translating knowledge, trust building, co-construction of meaning, co-creation of value	Inter-national and Inter-organizational
Cultural hybridity	Integrating multiple cultures into the organization	Organizational (offshore)
Identity multiplicity	Operating at the interface of cultural groupings, negotiating a state of “in-betweenness”, tensions arising from the adoption of multiple cultural identities	Individual

positions discussed above. To successfully extend their networks into overseas markets, the organizations operating in these intercultural interstices have to mobilize all the above processes, that is, to draw upon local and global connections and resources (e.g. Diaspora linkages), actively seek to make sense of inter-organizational knowledge flows by valuing and assigning key individuals as knowledge mediators who are able to negotiate and reconcile mixed identities and status differences. These processes have to be connected and anchored by an organizational culture which embraces hybridity of cultures, norms, and practices.

2.3 Case Analysis

Evidence from the data suggests that VanceInfo engaged in practices aligned to the creolization concept introduced in the previous section. As demonstrated in previous work (Abbott et al. 2013), companies engaging in these practices were able to manage the complexities inherent in cross-cultural collaboration at the inter-organisational, intra-organisational, organisational and individual levels. It is further hypothesized that this capacity may translate into an organisational capability to draw upon multiple sources of knowledge, resources, norms and practices notwithstanding organisational and inter-cultural differences, that further strengthens other related organisational capabilities and the organisation’s competitive positioning. Thus, performance of such firms may be enhanced by their ability to demonstrate these creolized practices. Below VanceInfo’s creolized practices are described based on the four underlying dimensions of the creolization concept: *network expansion*, *mutual sensemaking*, *cultural hybridity* and *identity multiplicity*.

2.3.1 Network Expansion

VanceInfo is keen to establish a global presence and to this end makes efforts to create and extend its networks both globally and locally and to make linkages between its local and global business partners. An example of this can be seen in VanceInfo's inclusion in the Australian Victoria State Government's eServices Panel. This strategic move allows them to influence decisions on vendor selection in service provision for the Victoria State Government. According to a VanceInfo senior executive, this initiative is an opportunity for "cultural and trade exchange". The role also provides a means of expanding VanceInfo's reach into the Australian market, facilitating further bilateral trade agreements between Victoria and the Chinese government, solidifying existing relationships between the two countries and allowing VanceInfo to extend its networks both locally with the Chinese government and globally with other potential Australian partners. The release of the joint press release (M2 Communications 2011) further reinforces the influence of the emergent partnership and demonstrates the considerable leverage that VanceInfo will have in accessing the Victoria State government contracts. Key VanceInfo personnel were involved in these negotiations, personnel who, as will be shown below are of varying cultural backgrounds, able to bring their unique perspectives and talents into these negotiation processes.

Through its ability to mobilise and leverage local and global resources, VanceInfo is able to link global partners with local Chinese clients, by acting in a "re-seller" type role, utilising client software platforms or products to create solutions for its local clientele. VanceInfo trades on its own highly regarded local reputation and the trust it has gained from its foreign clients to engineer these deals. Thus, they extend their reach into the Chinese market and extend the utility of their foreign contacts for further expansion. In the next section it will be seen that this ability helps to build capabilities which strengthen the value proposition of the company. The following quote illustrates an example of complex negotiations involving local and global partners:

The product of the [client] company is middleware. And the main client of the [client company] is the [named Chinese company]. When they try to [promote their products] at this end, their sales in the China market. They don't know which kind of the product feeds the demand, especially when they want to sell to [major Chinese financial companies], - that is very important to clients in China. So, we give them [information about] the [local] demand. We give them advice on which kind of product is needed by the client - of China, the domestic client. So, they will judge our suggestions and after they've made their decision, they will give me the orders to do coding for them. Then, after coding and testing, they will sell their new product in the China market....

We do planning, we do resource estimation and we do resource allocation - scheduling kind of things [for our foreign clients]. I believe all our customers have greater interest in the China market. So, we would also help with marketing, sales, tapping the support; maybe not only tapping of the support of the China customer, but also for all over - global.

VanceInfo also demonstrates their network expansion practices through mobilising their own resources in different geographical contexts in order to take advantage of local knowledge in those contexts and by tapping into global resources that are known to the organisation for advice and for implementing practices locally.

An example is given of the way in which the organisational centres of excellence (COEs), which are described further in the next section, are organised and funded through contacts with local Chinese state organisations and global foreign experts which provide a structure for growing these organisational knowledge hubs:

Say we try to incubate [build a COE for] the health care industry, so I think the health care industry is very complicated but we are taking a look right now how to leverage mobile computing and also cloud computing and we talked to a lot of thought leaders in this space, even we talked to the former UK CIO of UK department of health, or NHS, we also talked to a number of leading hospitals and personally, I am also an investor of a few private equities and venture capital funds

[The business-facing groups] are also virtual members of the cooperate-wide center of excellence, and then cooperate-wide center of excellence actually is funded by cooperate money; and then we also have dedicated members and virtual members. So this is how it is structured today and I think the Chinese government also plays an important role to a certain degree, so some part of the central government or municipal government, they are willing to give us grants, research grants, yea, so that also could be helpful.

2.3.2 Mutual Sensemaking

Through engagement with client projects, VanceInfo is able to immerse its staff in the foreign client environment to obtain value beyond product or process knowledge, so as to be able to assimilate aspects of the foreign context as well. Rotations (visits by VanceInfo staff to client sites) on foreign projects could, for example, last for about 3 months. During this time, many aspects of the client's culture are experienced so as to provide valuable contextual information for completing the project:

We also have a good example of our onshore location we have, at any given time 10 to 20 VanceInfo engineers in [an American city] working at this company's headquarters and again that is an experience and information in context they take away from that time period working in the company's head office. So it is great for them [the staff], great for the company, and it really helps us understand what they [the client] are looking for.

The learning gained by staff on rotation or on training at a client's site is then disseminated within the organisation through several mechanisms, e.g. COEs, as mentioned above, knowledge bases, knowledge sharing opportunities and development of organisational training packages. Thus, these individuals become knowledge mediators, capable of translating knowledge from different contexts into a form that can be understood locally. This creates the opportunity for cross-fertilisation of ideas and creativity to emerge, an ability which is further discussed in the section below. This example illustrates:

We have a lot of synergies that come from developing skills when we work with multiple clients and so obviously for data privacy and IP protection standpoint the clients are clearly differentiated in different delivery centers but like I just said, by working these engineers through these delivery centers, that tends to see the cross pollination, if you

will, of technology and creativity that is used in these different deals and so our clients are pleasantly surprised that VanceInfo not only is familiar with their new service offerings and new technologies, we also bring things to the table from our own engineers, they have their own ideas, they work back and forth

The iPad project discussed in the next Research Findings section also demonstrates various aspects of mutual sensemaking in practice. Mutual learning opportunities between the Chinese developers and their UK counterparts were facilitated through: training in the technical skills needed on the project; staff rotations and visits from the UK team; and shared virtual spaces where information was kept. Knowledge creation and sharing was also a mutual effort, with VanceInfo staff promoting their own solutions to ideas proposed by the UK team and negotiating deliverables and corresponding completion timeframes. There was also an emphasis on using key knowledgeable individuals as “bridges” to facilitate communication on both sides. These aspects are discussed in greater detail in the next Research Findings section.

2.3.3 Cultural Hybridity

One of the key success factors identified the next Research Findings section was the development of a one-team mentality amongst team members working on the iPad project. Team members spoke of being part of a “big family” and of having a one-team mindset. They spoke of working for Microsoft and of following Microsoft practices rather than VanceInfo practices. So strong was the Microsoft ethos within this team that they scarcely seemed to differentiate themselves from the team working in London, but rather saw this as an extension of their own group. The use of agile methods to manage software development also promoted these strong ties and the strong team ethos.

When asked about organisational culture, the team members on the iPad project commented that each development centre or team seemed to have its own microcosm of culture which was aligned to the client. For those working on Microsoft projects out of the UK, they claimed to have a European mindset and found their fellow workers who were working on Japanese projects foreign because they were following Japanese customs. This is elaborated further in that section. The outcome of the hybrid organisational culture is an environment which is deemed quite global and quite cross-cultural, which is tolerant of different perspectives and positions. Interviewees describe it as an open environment, where people feel free to share opinions and knowledge. This hybridity contributes to the development of a global image for the organisation and allows expansion into other territories:

I think even though we are still a small company at the global level, we do have a global footprint and we do have people, almost 1000 people now live in regions outside of China and a lot of them, they are very capable people and their working environment, even within our company, they are very cross cultural

The development of these multicultural perspectives has also helped VanceInfo to build new capabilities in language expertise as demonstrated by their success in localization work. Thus, their success in developing this creolized practice creates opportunities in other areas where creating value is important:

I would say too on the subject of localization, we actually inadvertently broke a record for most number of foreigners speaking different languages in one place in China, we have 102 languages supported all by native speakers all in Beijing and they are right down the road here,... you go in there and there's all the flags, we have everything from native Basque speakers, we can find Welsh Gaelic speakers from Ireland, you can find anything, all the Indian languages, all the Indian state languages which is quite rare

2.3.4 Identity Multiplicity

In keeping with building a multicultural working environment, VanceInfo follows a strategy of hiring multicultural staff fluent in different languages that can bring different perspectives and different ideas emanating from their own varied background and experiences. Some key positions are held by people from these varied cultural backgrounds, e.g. marketing positions or heading up foreign subsidiaries:

Yea, if you look at them [VanceInfo employees], I don't say everyone, but a lot of... a big percentage of people [VanceInfo employees], they were educated in many places today, educated in UK, Australia, Canada, so that people have different cultural exposure, and then we also have American people, they speak fluently Chinese so they also communicate.

A “creole”, as discussed above, possesses unique characteristics that enable them to draw upon the values of the multiple cultures with which they identify in order to mediate and negotiate different cross-cultural and cross-organisational perspectives. Although not an explicit strategy with VanceInfo, such individuals were part of VanceInfo's managerial teams and executive and helped with strategising, making linkages, or advancing creolized practices such as network expansion or mutual sensemaking. Their roles were key to creating a space for innovation in the organisation:

Even within our company, we are very cross cultural, so for example, we have the cloud computing initiative within our company and we are trying to figure out what will be the impact of this industry and how we can leverage from that. We have a very capable consultant based in the Melbourne office [Australian], and then we also have another leader in Redmond [Chinese], he got a PHD from Carnegie Mellon University, and he used to work for Microsoft, so, these two people they are leading our cloud computing initiative in our company, so it's very cross-cultural and then people from China, from Hong Kong from the US, and Australia all participate in this effort and ideas flow from one region to another region; that's pretty compelling and powerful.

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