

Ethnic culture in the Sri Lankan construction industry

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One distinctive characteristics of the construction industry is the involvement of different groups of people with different cultures. Their values, attitudes, interests are diverse. In ensuring efficient and productive interaction of people, identification of cultural background of each individual plays a dominant role. It is therefore, important to appreciate and understand each participant's cultural differences/similarities. Using the four dimensions of a national culture established by Hofstede (1980), this paper aims to explore the ethnic cultural differences among project participants in the Sri Lankan construction industry. This study has focused on only two ethnic groups, namely Sinhalese and Tamils. The data for this study were obtained through structured questionnaire survey, based on the popular Value Survey Module, administered among Sinhalese and Tamil professionals in consultancy and contracting organisation of the industry. A total of 135 professionals were selected based on Quota Sampling method to take part in the survey. The respondents were limited to Engineers, Architects and Quantity Surveyors. In addition, few open ended interviews were conducted with selected experts in view of interpreting the results. The responses were analysed using Hofstede's cross cultural dimensions. Hofstede's has distilled cultural characteristics into 4 major groups: power distance; individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity.

From this research, it was identified that there is a significant difference between the cultures of these ethnic groups. It was found that the highest deviation between the ethnic groups is on the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI). Tamils have a very high uncertainty avoidance compared to Sinhalese indicating that Sinhalese are less threatened in ambiguous situations. The power distance dimension captured using the Power Distance Index (PDI), also shows a considerable difference between the two groups. It indicates that there is a huge gap between the superior and the subordinates in the Sinhalese culture. In the individualism-collectivism dimension, Sinhalese score a lesser value (32) compared to Tamils (68). Therefore, it can be stated that, Tamils are relatively more individualistic than Sinhalese. Computed value for masculinity and femininity, demonstrate that there is no significant difference between Sinhalese (value 53) and Tamils (value 54).

Since construction is teamwork, identification of ethnic culture and differences among groups is important for effective management of its workforce. This study provides a guide for managers to analyse cross-cultural influences of the two ethnic groups which can lead to innovative business practices, faster and better learning within the organisation and sustainable source of competitive advantage.

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