

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

Abstract:

An engineering approach to explain the Human Operating System called Culture.

In our today's society communication without IT is inconceivable. IT Technology provides networks, infrastructure, hardware, software and protocols for multi-format exchange of data and information. The internet connects people all over the world. But, besides the technology behind: how do we communicate as human beings? Why is the same thing something different somewhere else? Technologies which are reference at one place are unimaginable at another place. Software Solutions which are praised by one group are bedeviled by a second group. Working and collaborating for Europeans, Americans, Japanese and all kind of other nationalities, Norbert has more than 25 years of experience in this area.

BUT: don't expect a shareware to solve the problem. You may get a subroutine to apply some benchmarking.

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Introduction

When Peter called me some ago to ask me if I could tell something about Culture to an audience of IT Specialists, I thought this is a tough job. Especially if you do it for fun. How can you explain something like Personality, Character, Human Nature to Engineers?

My decision was to base the presentation on the book "Cultures and Organisations" from Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede¹, based on the researches he did for IBM in the 1980es.

By accident, a couple of days later I stumbled across the following article:

IBM dumps MS Office

About a month ago, when I was starting to work on my presentation, I received the following message in my RSS Feed:

IBM issues a ban on Microsoft Office

Big Blue's workforce told to switch to Lotus Symphony
<http://V3.co.uk>, 14 Sep 2009

IBM is reportedly dumping Microsoft Office in favour of its own version of Open Office, Lotus Symphony. According to reports, around 330,000 of IBM's current 360,000 employees have already started using Symphony and the rest have recently been told to stop using Microsoft Office. German economic newspaper Handelsblatt said that workers have been given 10 days to get the Microsoft software off their machines.

If IBM employees really want to continue using Microsoft Office after that they will have to get their manager's approval. Lotus Symphony is an office productivity suite that incorporates huge chunks of customised Open Office. It was developed by IBM in an attempt at luring customers away from Microsoft Office, so it was always a source of embarrassment that the company didn't use the product internally.

Most interesting, this news was first published in German Newspapers and not in the US. It was fun to read the comments on the articles the following days.

- "Poor IBM colleagues"
- "Substandard"
- "Half-Assed Software"

and many more negative comments. Why is it so difficult to switch to a different software that does more or less the same? So I started to look for some data about the use of Open Source Software worldwide.

What about Open Source Software?

There are as many statistics about Software Programs and Operating Systems as Vendors and Developers. Where to get some independent data about the every day user?

So I thought that it is a good idea to look to the world wide webserver statistics² which show the browser types and operating systems that visitors use on the internet.

Let us first take a look to the different Webrowsers:

- Microsoft Internet Explorer (Version 4 – 8)

1 Gert Hofstede, Geert Jan Hofstede "Cultures and Organisations", see literature index

2 Browser and OS Statistics from: <http://gs.statcounter.com>

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- Firefox (Open Source, all versions)
- Safari (Apple)
- Opera (Open Source, all versions)
- Google Chrome
- All others (Mozilla, Konqueror, Playstation, AOL, and the rest)

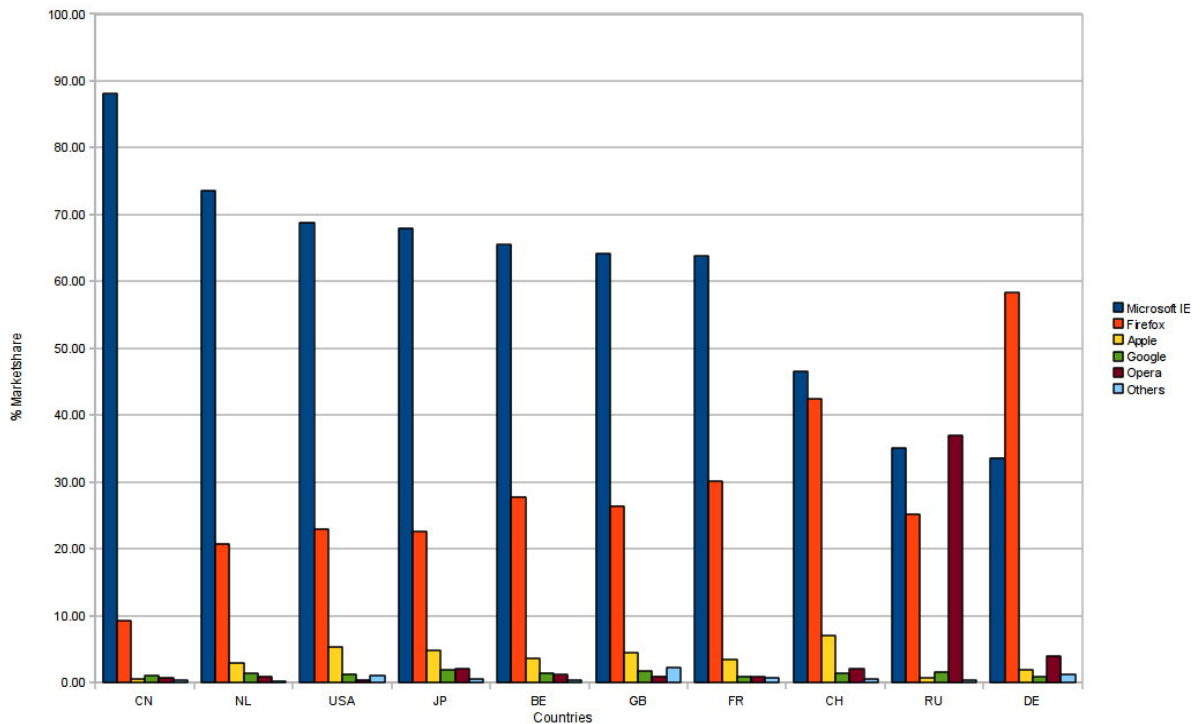


Illustration 1: Browser Marketshares in selected countries

Most interesting: Microsoft IE (all versions) has the highest marketshare with 88% in China, the second highest with 73% is Netherlands. The highest marketshare of Open Source browser Firefox with 58% is Germany.

The second slide shows the marketshares of top 5 Operating Systems:

- Microsoft Windows (2000, 2003, XP, Vista, 7)
- Apple MAC OSX
- Linux (all vendors/distributions)
- All others (Sun, OS/2, HP-UX and the rest)

Criteria for all others is a share below 0,1 %

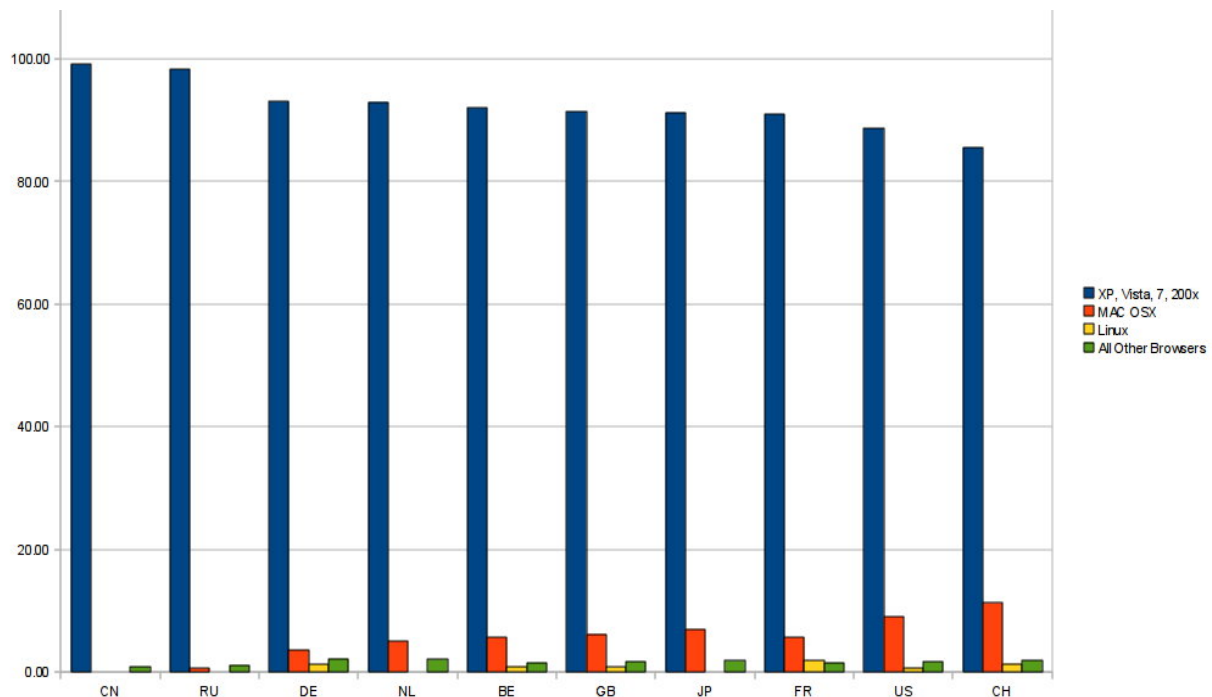


Illustration 2: Marketshare Operating Systems in selected countries

Again, the highest marketshare of Microsoft OS (all versions) is China – 99.3%. All other OS are marginal. The second highest share is in Russia, then we have a group of Central European Countries slightly above 90%. Netherlands and Germany with 92% are on the same level. While in Germany Linux is something like 2%, it is below 0.1% in NL.

US and Switzerland are the strongest Apple users with 7 respectively 8%. With something between 1 and 2 % Linux is somewhere between 1 and 2 percent – if listed at all.

How comes that Open Source has such a low market share, although it is for free? This should be highly interesting for everyone.

The best reason I could find as explanation:

THERE IS A CULTURE SHOCK BETWEEN WINDOWS AND LINUX³

But what is culture? And why are the figures different in the different countries?

3 "Windows is not Linux" : <http://linux.oneandoneis2.org/LNW.htm>

An Introduction To Culture

The starting point for everyone is the same – use a computer for your everyday work, leisure and fun. But why is the approach so different? It must have something to do with “Culture”.

The next objective is to find a way to deal with differences in thinking, feeling and acting with different people in different countries, companies or at home.

The following part of the presentation is based on the researches of Geert Hofstede done for Big Blue in the 1980es. IBM asked Hofstede exactly what Peter asked me some time in July - why do things work in some countries, and in others they don't.

Culture is nothing you inherit. Culture is learned.

What is culture? The root of the word is the Latin word for “cultivate” - to till a field and make it fertile.

The next question: In this room, are there any two persons who share exactly the same patterns of thinking, feeling or potential acting?

Why not?

Because we have been programmed in this way. What makes more sense to talk about programming in front of an audience of IT specialists?! Think about our body as the hardware – or mainframe, if you like. Culture as a kind of Software Program for your mind.

Your programming starts on the first day of your life: the contact with your mother, your parents, your family, your social environment. Later at school, during university and your job.

However, keep in mind that we are not programmed in the same way that computers are. What I want to say that if you know a person and one's past, you may understand the reactions. At the same time, everyone has the ability to deviate from the operating system and react in ways which are new, creative but also unexpected or destructive. This is where our emotions come into the game.

Let us make a short benchmark test for our software program.

The Colored Words

A Benchmark Test for your mind.

The following two slides will show a couple of objects. At the moment when they appear, please say the color of the object.

届盟节节乐 家快际加开 盟节東
亲节快快联年 家快南节
年津京明节 盟节東
届盟节节乐 家快南节
盟节東 亲节快快联年

Illustration 3: Slide with Number Words in Chinese Characters

GROEN ROOD
BLAUW
GEEL ZWART
WIT ROOD
GROEN BLAUW
ROOD GEEL

Illustration 4: Slide with Number Words in Western European Characters

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The two slides show the color words white, black, red, green, yellow and blue in different colors than they mean. While the first slide shows the words in Chinese characters, the second slide shows the words in Western characters. The group is asked to shout the colors of the letters loudly.

To identify the colors of the Chinese characters is no problem, however if the Western wording is shown, it gets confused.

The reason is that this is a type of psycholinguistic test that poses some difficulty on the brain: the portion of the brain that handles language is the same portion that has to verbalize the color of words, while it has to ignore the meaning of the words representing the colors. Using foreign characters that the brain doesn't know, takes the domination of the language handling away.

So until now we learned that culture is something we learn and can be different. As we are technicians, let us think about simply installing a different software, and all our problems should be gone!

The Human Processing Speed

Again I spent weeks to find some technical specifications about the human computer in general. What about a simple Software Update (*some vendors call it Security Patch*). How long does it take? Here some facts and figures:

Modern IT Technologies:

FireWire = 1.000.000.000 Bit/sec (1 Billion bit / sec)
100 BaseT Ethernet: 100.000.000 (100 Million bit / sec)
WiFi = "N" 108.000.000, "G" 54.000.000 (108 resp. 54 Million bit / sec, actual)
High-Definition Digital Video Stream: 12 Million b/s (Mb)
DVD: 4 ... 8 Million b/s, Cable & Digital Satellite: 2 Mb/s
CD Audio: 44.100 Bit / sec (44.1 kb/sec)

Human Computer:

Data Input Rate from all sense organs to brain: 11 Million Bit/second
Input Data Rate from Brain to Memory Buffer: 40 Bit per second
Memory Buffer Size: 150 Bit
Transfer Rate from Memory Buffer to Short-Term Memory: 0.5 Bit/sec
Short-Term Memory size: 1,500 Bit
Buffer Overflow of Short-Term Memory after Max. 50 Minutes
Short-Term to Long-Term Memory (Conscious): depends on your sleep

Conclusion: you can try to install a new Software Program, but it will take a LONG time!

Bringing it all together - The Human Computer

Let's speak about Culture, the software of our mind again. For example, the way we show respect (or not), the way we greet (handshakes, kisses), the way we eat (chopsticks vs. cutlery).

Example: A presentation to the board of directors in Japan

1. The Japanese consider it to be impolite to present something during a meeting and ask for a decision. They expect the information upfront to prepare themselves. This is why I had to submit my plan before the meeting
2. The meeting itself was just to create Harmony, the decision was taken during the sightseeing tour.

3. Harmony and respect is shown by relaxing and closing the eyes, which is offending for Western Europeans.

At the same time, Culture can be an individual and a collective phenomenon. Culture is shared with people who are living in the same social environment or spend some time living in this environment. Culture consists of the (unwritten) rules of the social game. My favorite definition of Culture is *the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.*

To make things more complicated, we do not have ONE culture or software of your mind, but within ourselves have to respond to different layers of culture:

- The **National Layer** - your home country or several countries, when you are a nomad, and language(s)
- The **Regional Layer** - your place of birth, ethics, religion, and dialects
- The **Gender Layer** - whether you are born as girl or boy
- The **Generation Layer** - separating children from parents and grandparents
- The **Social Layer** - your education, occupation or profession
- The **Corporate Layer** - whether you are employed, your organization, position and department

Now, let us summarize: we got a mainframe, our body. And we got a software program that's running on it. What else do we need?

We got Hardware (your body), we got Software for your mind, and yes, we need one final thing: the **Operating System**, known as Human Nature.

All Human beings, from Indians in Peru, Aborigines in Australia, Inuits in Greenland, Bankers at Wall Street, have one thing in common: Human Nature. It is inherited within our genes. It determines the physical and basic psychological functioning. Our instinct to eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, and self defense when in danger. Our ability to feel love, fear, anger, joy, sadness, shame. However what we DO with our feelings, how we express anger or fear, show our sadness, how we eat or drink: this is modified by our culture.

Last not least: everyone has a **Personality**. You also could call it our User Interface ...

When we started, I asked if there are two identical persons in this room. What makes us unique? Well, again a technical approach: just use the NOT function: our Personality is the set of programs, that we DO NOT share with anyone else.

Now, to make things simple again: just think about human beings as onions⁴:

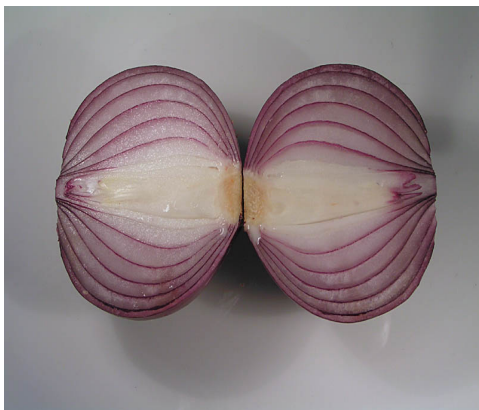


Illustration 5: The Onion Model

- The inner core of the onion is your Human Nature
- The outer shell is your personality.
- And in between, you got a couple of layers of culture.

Other people only see our outer shell, our interface for interaction. It is controlled by our core and filtered by the cultural layers.

4 this is contradictory to the model used in Hofstede's book, but it explains the cultural layers and the filter functions better than his approaches.

Norms, Values and Symbols

Well. We do have a better understanding of ourselves (if you like to be an onion). But what makes a culture? This is simple. Politicians love to use these terms: Values, Norms and Symbols.

Here are some examples for Symbols: objects, gestures, pictures or words that carry a particular meaning for those who share the same culture. Let me mention a well-known sign: the Swastika. While the Swastika became a symbol for Hitler and the terror during the Third Reich and WWII, it is a symbol of good light, life, love and good luck in Indian and Asian cultures. Same symbol, different meaning.

Norms are collective rules and activities, for example the way how we greet each other, social and religious activities, paying respect to each other and most important, the way how we communicate.

Most important are our Values. It is the first thing we human beings acquire as we are incompletely equipped for life at the time of birth. Scientists say it takes between 10 to 12 years before we absorb the necessary information from our natural and social environment. This includes norms (such as learning to visit the bathroom in time) and symbols (our language).

Here we are again. We learn our culture. But what is also important: Culture reproduces itself by forwarding our parents' values, norms and symbols to the next generation. And still it changes. Just think about our young generation - which is the future old generation.

Now that I have told you so much about the Human Computer, Onions, Programs - how to apply all this stuff in our everyday work?

Example: Irritations raised by the different approaches of introducing a Corporate Mission Statement by American and European Managers. Both groups did not understand the totally different approaches.

The Four Dimensions Of Culture

Hofstede found out that global leaders must learn not only the customs, courtesies, and business protocols of their collaboration partners in other countries. They also have to understand the national character, management philosophies, and mindsets of the people.

Hofstede conducted several researches, studies and surveys over the years. The result is a measurement system for national values. He called it the Four Dimensions of Culture, it is a universal system to measure and compare values all over the world..

Power Distance: indicates “the extent to which a society accepts that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally”. In other words: the boss is always right.

Uncertainty Avoidance: indicates “the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain or ambiguous situations”. In other words: no risk, no fun.

Individualism: refers to a “loosely knit social framework in a society in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only”. **Collectivism,** the opposite, occurs when there is a “tight social framework in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, they expect their in-group (relatives, clan, organizations) to look after them, in exchange for that owe absolute loyalty to it. In other words: Capitalism vs. Socialism

Masculinity: with its opposite pole, femininity, expresses “the extent to which the dominant values in society are assertiveness, money and material things, not caring for others, quality of life, and people”. In other words: elbows or pampers

The following table shows some examples about the different rankings of selected countries. In the meantime, indexes for many countries are available. For further information, please refer to the literature index at the end of this document.

TABLE: Country Rankings in Cultural Dimensions for 74 countries and regions for some selected countries.

Power Distance		Uncertainty Avoidance		Individualism Collectivism		Masculinity Femininity	
Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	MALAYSIA	1	GREECE	1	USA	1	SLOVAKIA
6	RU	5	BE (FR)	1	USA	2	JP
13	CN	7	RU	3	GB	6	CH (DE)
23	CH (FR)	10	BE (NL)	5	NL	12	GB
28	FR	12	JP	8	BE (NL)	12	DE
31	BE (FR)	20	FR	12	BE (FR)	12	CN
40	BE (NL)	37	CH (FR)	14	FR	19	USA
50	JP	43	DE	16	CH (DE)	21	BE (FR)
58	USA	50	CH (DE)	18	DE	23	CH (FR)
61	NL	53	NL	20	CH (FR)	49	BE (NL)
64	DE	62	USA	34	JP	49	FR
64	GB	66	GB	38	RU	63	RU
70	CH (DE)	69	CN	59	CN	72	NL
74	AUSTRIA	74	SINGAPORE	74	GUATEMALA	74	SWEDEN

Conclusion: why is the grass always greener on the other side.

Scientific explanation: looking out of our own culture to a different culture, there are three options:

- Negative: we think our own culture is superior. Why should we adapt the other one?
- Neutral: we may share common values, norms and symbols. Adaptation or share is not necessary.
- Positive: things that look better than in our own culture. Change makes sense, as we expect to gain something.

In fact, positive changes and “making things better” are the main driver for cultural changes. However, a set of positive values can come along as “package deal” together with other items. The question is: what do I get and what do I have to pay for it.

Literature and Links

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