

Project Management in Asia and Managing Multinational Project Teams

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Abstract

While this paper will suggest successful Project Management Methodologies and Processes, it centres on what variables are to be considered to ensure successful project delivery in Asia. Project Management in Asia has many facets not familiar to others outside the particular country. During the presentation we will also explore topics such as the winning of projects in Asia, the preparation for the set up in a new environment, as well as the foreseeable and unforeseeable problems that come with setting up in a new country.

The discussion will take us on a journey about lessons learnt, how we see the actions and inverse reactions and how they should be handled prior to and during the project.

Itcom Australia has been involved in a number of large telecommunication infrastructure projects (centering mainly around Contact Centres) over the past five years. Our recent experience spreads across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, China and South Korea. Graeme Ross remembers the early nineties when he travelled through nine countries in five weeks across Asia to build a wide area network for a multinational company.

Itcom's analysis and findings will be developed under the following headings - people, business activities, project process and environmental conditions. The highs and lows of a project are as colourful as the aggressive negotiations, not to mention the accolades that follow the satisfaction and relief at a successful project.

The outcome of these projects has always been successful, but this has not been without a significant learning curve in relation to cultural and environmental issues. In addition to these, various project-centric differences need to be overcome in sensitive multicultural environments.

Across Asia there are differences between culture, business practices and attitudes. As we enter these uncharted waters, a great deal of adjustment, sensitivity, patience and humour is required.

We would like to share with attendees at the conference, intelligence and ideas, collective learning and experiences, to aid their launch into the Asian market.

Introduction

This paper will share some of my knowledge and experience gained from many years of consulting through the Asia Pacific region, in regard to project management in Asia and managing multi-national project teams.

The paper will cover specific areas such as people, business activities, project methodology, environmental/economic conditions and general helpful hints for dealing with our Asian neighbours.

Itcom Australia has worked consistently over many years, on IT infrastructure projects, more specifically Call Centres. However, the experience gained and lessons learnt are broadly applicable to Project Management and so cover the vertical markets that Call Centres may be servicing, for example, telecommunications, banking, insurance, utilities, and so on. Our company's recent experience spreads across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, China and South Korea.

Key Points:

Two key factors must be taken in account, irrespective of country, language, economics and culture:

1. One must always treat people with respect and dignity, and
2. Typically project management success is measured by three criteria
 - the project is completed on time,
 - the project comes in on budget, and
 - the project works from day 1 and continues to do so.

It does not matter which country one is working in; adherence to these two principles will provide a foundation for Project Management success.

Context

Itcom Australia, based in Melbourne, was established in 1994. We are consultants in:

- Information technology and telecommunications,
- System and network design and delivery,
- Project management, and
- Design, specification, procurement and installation management

Our objective is to deliver to our customers a level of service and outcomes that exceed their expectations. Itcom has worked consistently and successfully in the financial, manufacturing and service industries, in the design, development and management of a wide range of telecommunication and information technology projects.

Itcom's management of these projects has often had to take into consideration staffing levels of up to 12,000 people, spread over various countries and continents. Diplomacy and communication is an integral part of the success of any project. By highlighting today our challenges and successes in project management in Asia (South Korea in particular), I hope to help other project managers avoid some of the traps and make the most of the opportunities in this exciting and expanding market.

My most recent project in South Korea was the stimulus for the paper I am presenting today. In my experience project management processes, performed correctly, are the same the world over. However, the same cannot be said for the culture, food, accommodation, business etiquette, transport and economics, of the various countries in which Australian project managers may find themselves working.

The 1990s experience

One of first projects I undertook in Asia was in the early nineties, which took me through nine countries in five weeks and interviewed in excess of 60 organisations to design a data telecommunications network for a multinational domiciled in Australia. The people I encountered were polite and respectful, good business negotiators, and always ensured their interests were represented. Examples that spring to mind include:

- The Indonesian gentleman who assured me I needed to have his skills for negotiating the best deal and that I needed to pay his airfare to the city where the Telco was domiciled.
- An agent we had to employ in Thailand to oversee the new equipment, to ensure there was no inappropriate use of the device. The main reason for this, was that army personnel, too old for the service, still needed to be given work to do!
- The varying commercial interests in the Philippines that had to be included in discussions, even though they were incapable of providing any of the services I was investigating.

Of course global markets have moved on somewhat, however cultural, personal and business dealings still carry their own national cultural and political flavour to this day.

Project Management in Asia

So where do we start, when faced by such a comprehensive dilemma as a project in Asia?

That was a question I asked myself back in the 90's, when Itcom was given the opportunity to manage the introduction of a Call Centre in Kuala Lumpur for Petronas, which is the major oil company in Malaysia. We had then been in the Project Management business for a number of years, and at first it seemed that this would be just another project: follow the rules and processes, and all will be fine.

As it turned out, that trip had its challenges, but it was very successful. At the end we had the satisfaction of not only handing over a successful project, but also of having learnt a lot about Asian – particularly Malaysian - culture. This gave us a foundation on which to build our future relationships in Asia, in terms of dealing with and building our understanding – especially our business understanding – of Asian cultures.

In Malaysia, we had found the best approach was to be up front with our colleagues there, seeking advice on how to behave and how to work with them. Their suggestions included:

- Do not touch people
- Stop meetings at prayer times
- Be very careful not to get involved in, or discuss, politics
- Malaysians are primarily Muslim, and so they generally avoid alcohol and pork, and eat specially prepared food.

Hence meetings, and the work place in general, were as much about understanding and education as they were about process. We found this again when, from 2001-02, Itcom directed four major Call Centre implementations and upgrades for a number of organizations, across India, Malaysia and Singapore. These ranged across the financial, petroleum and communications sectors, the Call Centres in these projects varied in size from 50 to 1500 seats. None of these were particularly difficult projects, however the education of our Asian colleagues in terms of process and methodology required substantial effort. Project management in each country is different. While the methodologies and the processes are the same, from prayer time in Malaysia to lunch time in Korea it is all about understanding and fitting into the local way of life.

On the other hand China is a unique, emerging market because of its size and because of its recent acceptance into the WTO. Business in China is made even more difficult by the fact that to be successful, joint venture companies between the off-shore company and a Chinese local company need to be established. Often, rather than the accepted Asian practice of trading in US dollars, a lot of these joint ventures require trading to be done in Chinese Yuan (RMB) which cannot be taken out of the country. This has been our experience to date.

In other Asian countries normal business practices vary. For instance:

- In Thailand, Indonesia, The Philippines and even in Malaysia typically 40% of business remuneration can be in the form of non currency, for example perhaps a substantial gift to key players. This transaction is not necessarily included in any agreed documentation but is still considered normal business practice.
- In India, business is about relationships and price.
- The more mature markets in North Asia (Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan etc) are bound by strong ethical business practices and corporate governance. In this region, business is all about investing in the relationship, for example through meals and associated entertainment, and through gifts. Respect is gained as the relationship develops.

I will now speak in more detail about Itcom's recent South Korean experience with Cigna.

The Cigna projects

From 2002 to 2003, Itcom undertook major projects throughout Asia for Cigna insurance (a North American insurance company selling life, accident and health insurance via the telephone). In brief, these projects involved:

- Reviewing 13 Contact Centres in South Korea with over 1500 telemarketing seats. The outcome was a report of 16 recommendations to improve the operation, environment and technical equipment within the centres, which would provide cost savings and productivity improvements totalling US\$20 million. Itcom was asked to implement three of the recommendations immediately. These were the replacement of specific voice equipment, introduction of an RFP for a Telemarketing system, and an upgrade of the Contact Centres' technical infrastructure. The US\$3 million project was carried out on time and within budget, upgrading over 600 seats at 4 centres.
- In Taiwan, Itcom upgraded the existing telemarketing equipment at the Cigna Contact Centres throughout the island. We also carried out a review of the voice network and associated equipment within the Centres. The recommendations totalled savings of over US\$700,000.
- We also upgraded various systems in Hong Kong, Indonesia and China

About South Korea

South Korea is both Itcom's most recent project base, and an exciting country in which to do business. With a population of 46.4 million in 1998, South Korea is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. About 48 percent of the population live in six major cities, with 30% living in the capital, Seoul. South Korean is the official language and is spoken throughout the country. English is taught in middle and high schools, but it is generally not spoken outside of international business situations.

South Korea is amongst the fastest growing nations in the developing world, one of the "four tigers" of Asia. "Three decades ago, GDP per capita was comparable with levels in the poorer countries of Africa and Asia. Today its GDP per capita is roughly 20 times North Korea's and equal to the lesser economies of the European Union." (Source: www.nationmaster.com, accessed 30 June 2003). Of course, as in all developing countries there are many financially disadvantaged people in South Korea, but poverty does not appear to be as extreme or as widespread as say, in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. South Koreans love their credit cards. Why wouldn't they, when up until the fourth quarter of last year, checking an applicant's financial status and setting of personal credit limits based upon current personal assets and liabilities was NOT undertaken! From cleaning staff through to IT professionals, wages were equal to, or in some cases surpassed, those in Australia. People from other countries, such as Japan and Hong Kong, do not have the propensity to spend in cash or via the credit card. People from Taiwan and India have even less disposable income.

Planning, and first impressions of South Korea

One interesting part of dealing with the Asian market, perhaps often overlooked, is preparation for the trip - what I call the introductory stage of a project.

The initial contract for work in Asia is usually established through contacts that will NOT always give you an accurate picture of what lies ahead. They may not tell you about the culture, the weather, the food and how you will survive for perhaps a long period of time in this environment without your creature comforts. A lifestyle that can be endured for a short contract, for instance one or two weeks, becomes much more challenging when you are there on a contract of several months, or longer. For instance, perhaps some of you are partial to a nice red wine now and again. I certainly am! But going to South Korea, you may want to make this a part of your contract negotiations – a couple of good bottles of red, that would retail here for perhaps \$20, will cost up to A\$200 in most parts of Asia. In South Korea, *soju* is the national drink, and the cost of *our* national drink – beer! – can be prohibitive, especially if it is imported beer. The answer might be to make frequent trips home, and ensure you take back as much of your favourite wine (or beer), as customs regulations allow, on each return trip.

When setting up your contract be sure to assess the best deal for yourself in US or Aussie dollars. Hedging against currencies can be a very risky business. Clothes medicines are things we take for granted, until you cannot find them in a foreign country.

Travel arrangements, and money

Getting to Korea is relatively easy from Australia. There are daily direct flights by both Korean Air and Asiana (code share with Qantas) ex Sydney. Alternatively one can fly to Hong Kong, from which there are regular flights to Seoul (taking approximately 3 hours) throughout the day. Other Asian destinations are equally easy to get to by air, as there are daily services out of both Melbourne and Sydney to Asian hubs such as Singapore and Bangkok.

International flights arrive into Incheon airport, some 70 km outside of Seoul. Transport into Seoul might be via hotel car, which needs to be booked in advance of arrival, for example at the time of hotel booking. Alternatively one can catch the airport limousine (bus) service. Tickets for this service can be purchased at the counter directly outside of the Entrance Hall. The bus service stops at all major hotels.

It is best to exchange Australian dollars for Korean Won either here in Australia at the airport before departure or at Incheon airport. Selected global ATM machines that take Visa and/or MasterCard are another source of local currency. These foreign currency ATM's can be few and far between outside the major tourist areas.

One important requirement to check prior to departure is how long a visitor's visa is valid for, the rules surrounding this, and when is it necessary to get a work permit. For example in Taiwan no visa is required for a week's work, but if you are there longer than two weeks a work permit has to be obtained. As you would expect, visa and work permit regulations vary between Asian countries.

Travelling to distant countries can be a lonely and depressing experience. Always ensure ample budget for trips home and make the most cost effective and least time-consuming flight plans. An eighteen-hour door-to-door trip one-way from Korea cannot be a weekend event. Planning of trips home should be scheduled with minimal work disruption in mind, if possible try to schedule the trips to coincide with one of the many South Korean public holidays and should have the agreement of the customer. If you can include return trips in your contract it will assist your well being, both in an economic and personal sense.

Accommodation

Accommodation is very expensive in Seoul – up to seven hundred Australian dollars for a single night in a five star hotel. Most Asian hotels give their rates in US\$ rather than local currency. Ensure you factor enough money into your fees for accommodation or, better still, have the client organise and pay for the accommodation. However if you do this make sure that you are party to the accommodation selection

process. The quality of hotels of less than five-stars, varies considerably. Also check out serviced apartments. We found not only to be cost effective but allows you to hunt for your own food and cook at home. A major mission is to negotiate with your customer to pay for the accommodation.

Let your travel agent know where your Korean office is, so the hotel closest to work can be found. Getting around Seoul by taxi is very time consuming whilst not expensive. If one is staying at a hotel, for instance on the wrong side of the river, then one could lose upwards of two hours each day, just in travel.

Food, Glorious Food!

How can I begin to convey the problems we went through in regard to eating in South Korea! Exotic flavours were interesting at first, but after a short time we longed for standard Aussie fare. But vegetables such as pumpkin, peas and mushrooms (edible ones, that is) are very rare in South Korea. Meat, as we would know it here, is only found in “Western” restaurants, which, while not rare, the cost of eating out at these restaurants can become prohibitive, unless you budget for it. So we scoured Seoul for anywhere that sold western food.

I must tell you about our encounter with Gavin the sausage man! Gavin was a Scot who had started working in Seoul 15 years ago as the local representative of an equipment supplier. His craving for a plate of good western-style meat led him, during a trip home to Scotland, to purchase a sausage machine. He then sourced the sausage meat from within South Korea and the skins from Japan. He now not only has a sausage restaurant but also manufactures sixteen different sausage products for the five star hotels in Seoul and other restaurants.

Environmental conditions

One of the major factors I had to contend with was the weather. I, like a lot of others, thought that Asia was always warm. I was not disappointed when in October I arrived in Seoul to a fairly mild autumn, but nothing prepared me for the –16 to –20 degrees Celsius I had to endure during the winter months. The wind would simply cut through you as you walked to work, no matter how much you rugged up. The sight of snow in the metropolitan area as you looked out of the hotel window was totally foreign to me although delightful and exciting.

The totally inadequate infrastructure was also a challenge. Even though the roads are wide, the subway is one of the largest in the world and there are buses running constantly (at one point we counted up to 30 buses in a single city block), peak hour in Seoul lasts for most of the day. When going to dinner on Friday night, it could take two hours to travel 10 kilometres, almost as long as we were going to be at the restaurant! The message here is to allow plenty of travel time to get to your destination.

In Seoul, the restaurants are numerous which is not surprising. The Koreans start going to lunch at 11:45 to ensure they clear the building by 12 noon, and they take their full hour. On the first day at work there, I looked up to find myself the only person left in the office. Usually, everyone goes to restaurants for lunch. Any meetings or discussions are disrupted for lunch, or at least organised around lunch. I learnt a golden rule: do not stop a Korean going to lunch as he can be very upset. I was also to find that expats who have been in Korea for a long time, have developed the same habits.

Social and business etiquette

So what is considered appropriate behaviour in Asia? Understanding social dos and don'ts is critical if you are trying to build strong and successful business relationships with trading partners in the Asian region. Globalisation of business does not mean you can afford to ignore regional, and national, respect.

If you do not make an effort to understand the culture of the people you are looking to trade with, you will probably fail to achieve the level of success you desire. Saying “I am from Australia and did not realise that would be considered rude” is a lame excuse, and will be treated as such. “I did not understand” can be

translated, as “I did not bother to do my research”. It will certainly make the task of building rapport, trust and relationships even harder.

If Asia is Asia, then basically once you have researched one country you have mastered them all, right? Wrong! Asia is a region, not a country. There are so many variances from one country to another that need to be understood – I could not hope to possibly cover them all in this paper. The following are important issues to consider in terms of social and business conduct. They can alter significantly and are often foreign to our upbringing. For instance:

- Appropriate strength of a handshake can vary,
- To bow or not to bow,
- Do you necessarily initiate a handshake in places like Malaysia this can be offensive,
- What name do you use in an introduction or meeting?
- What are the seating arrangements for a meeting?
- Who can and cannot speak at a meeting?
- When and how should you exchange business card, and what do you do with them after the exchange?
- What should be written on the business card?
- Do you understand what can be considered obscene gestures?
- What is appropriate business attire?
- Is gift giving appropriate?
- Are certain colours offensive?

I am not implying that doing business in Asian regions means that you need to become an expert on regional customs, but it is important to make a genuine effort to understand local people and their culture.

Following are a few extracts taken from the web on appropriate business conduct in South Korea. I am sure that without doing such research, I would be sure to cause offence in some way:

- Since triangles have negative connotations in this culture, these shapes should be avoided in your promotional material or visual aids.
- When entering a group meeting, the senior member of your party should enter the conference room first, then the next highest-ranking person, and so on. Moreover, the Koreans will be lined up inside in order of importance.
- Generally, Koreans have an intense pride in their country and a rich sense of its history. Consequently, it is important that you make every effort not to confuse the history and culture of Korea with other Asian countries, especially Japan.
- It is important to remove your shoes when entering a home, restaurant or temple. Eating, sitting, and sleeping are done on the floor, so this area has to remain clean. Position your shoes so that the toes are pointing away from the building.
- You may beckon someone by extending your arm palm down and moving your fingers up and down. Beckoning a person by moving a single finger toward you is considered very rude.
- Modesty is very important in South Korea. When you are paid a compliment during a conversation, respond by insisting that you are not worthy of such praise. Regardless, do not acknowledge a compliment by saying “thank you” or otherwise affirming it.
- When shaking hands or passing something such as a business card or a glass to be refilled, make sure that if you are using your right hand to do the passing, then the left hand is touching some part of your body. A normal ‘Australian’ handshake would be considered rude in Korea if the left hand were not touching a part of one’s body.
- Answer questions affirmatively and in the most positive way, even when you have to deliver negative information. (source: www.executiveplanet.com, accessed 29 June 2003)

Female business-travellers in Asia

Female business-travellers face an additional set of potential problems when working in Asia. Korea is a Confucian society based on respect for elders and the subservience of females. Unfortunately, and despite the

fact that the feminist movement is active in South Korea, it is therefore necessary for all women travellers there to anticipate gender discrimination. One website says: "It is still rare to have women participate in business in South Korea and female business travellers may have to overcome some initial hesitancy. If women will be part of your negotiating team, it is important that you tell your contact, since the South Korean side may need some time to accept this arrangement." (www.executiveplanet.com, accessed 30 June 2003).

Business etiquette needs to take this into account. In South Korean business culture, women rarely shake hands. Western men should not try to shake hands with a Korean woman; Western women will have to initiate a handshake with Korean men. Women typically wear very conservative skirt and blouse combinations or business dresses. Pants and pantsuits for women have not gained as much acceptance in this country. Women are advised to dress modestly, since revealing clothing for women is perceived as a sign of poor character. In predominately Muslim countries such as Malaysia, modest dress is even more important, and business travellers should take their cues from local business people. Women may need to cover their hair when out in public.

The Korean culture of business relationships being developed after work hours, at pubs and restaurants over meals and drinking, also disadvantages female business travellers. Such gatherings, regarded as extremely important in doing business in that country, are usually seen as male only affairs.

Communication

Language and communication is the major hurdle to overcome in the business environment. This problem can be dealt with very effectively, by employing a translator who also has technical knowledge of the field of work. In our experience, in South Korea our translator's high-level South Korean and English language skills did not always result in clarity of understanding, because they could not grasp the technical intricacies of the matter under discussion and therefore sometimes missed the intent of the point they were translating. For example, at one point in relation to a delivery of equipment, we asked via our translator whether the equipment was on site and whether the installation had begun. The answer to both questions came back as "yes, the equipment is on site, and the installation is underway." But, as we later learned, the South Koreans had actually replied to the effect that the PABX equipment was on a truck, and the staff that would do the installation were ready to start work!

It cannot be stressed too highly the difference between literal English translation, and what we as Australians understand and interpret words and phrases to mean. Ensure your translator is skilled not only in literal translation but also in the correct interpretation of the work being undertaken. A further issue is that in order to please, the local team may give you the answer they think will make you happy, rather than the actual facts. As we became aware of this, we would ask further questions which verified the facts. I would say that the single biggest roadblock to success with project management in Asia could be attributed to misunderstandings arising from language.

Business negotiations

When discussions are conducted in languages other than English, pay attention to both the tone and delivery of what is being said, as well as watching body language carefully. This can give clues to any possible problems.

Each culture has its own negotiation methods, however the most emphatic I have found is Korea, here the negotiation starts to the far left or right of where they tend to finish up. The recent Nuclear Non Proliferation debate with North Korea is a typical example. What North Korea ultimately wanted was greater economic aid from the US. To ask this outright of the US would have met with immediate refusal. So the North Koreans start the whole debate in the UN, which then escalates into serious discussions and debate between Japan, the US and the North Koreans around North Korea's nuclear arms capability and program. The result is a meeting of the minds to resolve the issue.

Project Process

The project process was enlightening to say the least.

Established methodologies of project management and documentation, as we know them in the Western world, are not widely in use in Asia, and particularly in South Korea. In the most recent project, we dealt with many vendors over a twelve-month period and found it very difficult to influence their habitual behaviour.

Vendors and buyers alike were used to buying and selling on a handshake, and fixing any problems of implementation over the following six months. Users were reluctant to seek advice when then encountered problems, being unwilling to undergo further changes, and so became used to fixing their own problems.

The RFT/RFP process, so well known here, was initially beyond the comprehension not only of the South Koreans but also of some expatriate Westerners who had been in Asia for a long period of time. In South Korea, 'misunderstandings often arise over the issue of contracts because, at least traditionally, South Koreans and Westerners have had a different interpretation of them. To some South Koreans, a contract is only a general guide for conducting business; a change of conditions may invalidate the details of a particular contract. Other South Korean business people may still have the perception that a contract is not as important as the interpersonal relationship between the two parties and that an agreement made between two people who do not trust each other has little value.'" (www.executiveplanet.com)

For the vendors, the most aggravating part of the project was probably the massive learning curve they faced in terms of such things as accurate documentation and written communication. The RFT/RFP requirements, taken literally in Australia, were not followed by a single vendor in our South Korean experience – all submissions were returned to the vendors asking them to comply with the general specification requirements. Supplier and vendors in Asia are less likely than here to follow recognisable methodologies, test plans, implementation processes and training schedules. Simple things like the understanding of roles and responsibilities, reporting mechanisms, escalation procedures, even when to identify or escalate an issue are all new to many Asian project teams.

In the Cigna project, the tender and evaluation process brought with it some amusing situations, for example, vendors sought constantly to influence the evaluation process by frequent visits; constant badgering of anyone they felt might have influence, including calling in old favours, relying on friendships and networks. When unsuccessful in the tender process, the vendor's disbelief was quite amazing. The incumbent supplier, prior to the RFP, could not grasp why we were holding the RFP at all, given that this supplier was already in place.

After the new supplier was selected, the implementation process in South Korea also had it's own local 'charm'. Initially, the project meetings were very indulgent, with about 39 participants, including project managers, sales people, engineers and anyone else who thought there might be additional sales (or mileage) to be gained from these meetings. Ultimately, we settled down to a core team of 15 participants.

These meetings would take twice as long as the 'standard' project meetings we were used to in Australia. The main reason, not surprisingly, was the language barrier. But another important and related factor, which we did not anticipate, was the culture of holding a lengthy round-table discussion on each decision. A course of action would be decided and agreed upon, but then most of the meeting participants would repeat the question, the decision, and the reasons for it. Each point – often quite minor – could take up to five minutes of dialogue between the relevant parties. This may relate to the fact that 'South Korea is a collectivist culture, so the group, rather than the individual, prevails. Decisions are made with the consensus of the group.'" (www.executiveplanet.com, accessed 29 June 2003.)

I would say the best way for a project to get off on the wrong foot, is for the Australian, US or UK Project Manager to assume an arrogant, aggressive or dictatorial manner when addressing a local project team. I would recommend, as Stephen Covey says, that you 'seek first to understand, so as to be understood'. Tolerance is the key. Approach the task at hand with an underlying teaching or coaching philosophy. In

winning both a current project and future business, good Project Managers can offer Asian organisations skills and knowledge transfer, in addition to their own expertise.

Open and honest communication with the “project owner”, that is the senior executive, you as the Project Manager are reports to, should be established from the outset. During the life of the project, regular feedback or update sessions for the project owner must be held. It is important for this executive to attend the first project meeting to outline to his or her staff, and to your project team, the objectives, expectations, and significance of the project.

As in Australia, it is very important in Asia to not only celebrate short-term wins during the project, but also to celebrate the success of the project on its completion. Equally important during this celebration, one should recognise the contribution of key individuals to a project’s success.

Summary

Working in Asian countries can be a very rewarding experience, both financially and personally, however in preparing for the project itself you must also prepare for the changes in weather, culture, accommodation, food and communications. All are equally important - unless like me you enjoy a good steak and three veg, in which case food becomes the most challenging issue!

You must be happy in the new environment, especially if the contract is long term. Hence planning the trip before you go and understanding what you are about to face is an important part of the preparation.

Ensure all costs associated with food, accommodation and travel are adequately covered in your fees

Respecting the culture you are about to enter will ensure that you gain the utmost from the experience and that your project will be successful.