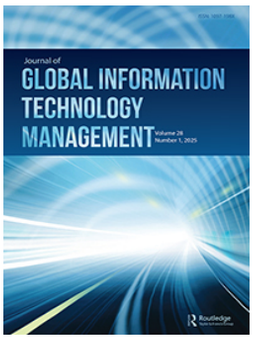

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Cultural Tensions and Adaptation Across Changing Global IT Work Environments: A Case Study of A South African IT Unit Reorganization

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ABSTRACT

Navigating cultural tensions during a reorganization to a globally distributed IT unit is a formidable challenge for IT managers and workers across diverse cultural contexts. Our case study integrates and extends national cultural dimensions and organizational culture models in global IS research with the relational dialectics perspective to explore the discursive and material nature of cultural tensions experienced by local IT unit workers in a multinational technology organization. Drawing from in-depth interviews, we use thematic and contrapuntal analysis to examine the cultural tensions onsite local IT unit managers and specialists from South Africa expressed about their changing relations with an offshore global IT headquarters. Our results reveal an overarching *autonomy versus control tension* and three interrelated subtensions—*workplace flexibility versus workplace standardization, strategic position versus compliant position, and empowerment advocacy versus bureaucratic dictates*—which influenced contradictory meanings and responses to the reorganization. These tensions and adaptation strategies, though rooted in the South African IT unit context, resonate with global IT work environments, particularly in emerging economies and high- and low-power-distance cultures like China and Western Europe, where similar dynamics of cultural negotiation between local autonomy and global control are evident. The central contribution of this research is a global IT cultural tensions model, offering practical implications for fostering more inclusive and harmonious IT work environments across diverse cultural and regional contexts.

KEYWORDS

Case study; cultural tensions; globally distributed IT work; international perspectives; organizational change; relational dialectics; South Africa; workplace adaptation

The rapid expansion of global connectivity and digitization has fundamentally transformed IT work, fostering unprecedented cultural exchanges within the industry (Cramton & Hinds, 2014; Jayaprakash & Pillai, 2021; Leonardi, 2011). Digital platforms now enable organizations across advanced and emerging economies to participate in the global IT market (Koppman et al., 2016). However, these developments have also highlighted significant cultural divides, particularly as the outsourcing of IT services continues to expand (Ashford et al., 2018). Managing these cultural differences has become a crucial aspect of navigating globally distributed IT environments, where successful collaboration between teams in different regions requires a strong focus on intercultural competence (Fang et al., 2016; Kotlarsky et al., 2008).

Cultural tensions in IT work, especially prevalent when organizations from developed economies outsource services to providers in emerging markets (Ashford et al., 2018; Mayasandra et al., 2006), require careful navigation of national and organizational cultural differences. In particular, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions framework highlights how power distance, individualism versus

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collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance can shape responses to global IT reorganizations. Complementing this, Schein's (2004) organizational culture model underscores the importance of reconciling espoused values with deeper, underlying cultural assumptions. For IT professionals, balancing technical expertise with cultural adaptability is critical, particularly in environments reliant on virtual communication technologies (Chudoba et al., 2005; Gregory & Keil, 2014).

At the core of this study is an exploration of how these cultural tensions are negotiated during global IT reorganizations. While previous research has often viewed culture in global IT work as a matter of alignment or fit, emphasizing its stability and homogeneity within specific groups or regions, we take a different approach. Grounded in Hofstede's national cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2005) and Schein's organizational culture model (Schein, 2004) – which traditionally assume cultural consistency – we complement this with Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter, 2011), which highlights the dynamic interplay of cultural interactions, focusing on the contradictions and negotiations that arise in global IT environments.

We investigate how IT professionals in a South African office of a multinational telecommunications corporation negotiate cultural tensions amid a reorganization. This focus addresses gaps highlighted by Jacks (2017), who argued that existing frameworks often fail to capture the complexities of culture within global IT work environments.

Our study also draws connections to similar cultural tensions reported in regions like India, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, where local IT workers face challenges reconciling local autonomy with global standardization (Davenport, 1998; Ravishankar et al., 2013; Reinhard, 2015). These findings illustrate the broader significance of cultural awareness in managing IT teams globally, emphasizing that cultural tensions are not region-specific but part of a wider trend in global IT management. We also examine the strategies IT professionals employ to navigate these cultural tensions and contribute to ongoing discussions on the role of cultural adaptability in global IT work.

For researchers, the study deepens the understanding of how cultural tensions manifest and are negotiated in global IT settings. For practitioners, it recommends that IT managers adopt strategies that acknowledge and actively engage with the contradictions and negotiations inherent in globally distributed teams. The next section defines the conceptual framework for the study. Subsequent sections outline the research methodology, findings, and implications for managing cultural tensions in global IT environments.

Conceptual foundations

Global IT work is inherently shaped by the complex interplay of cultural values, organizational dynamics, and technological systems. Cultural frameworks provide key insights into how workers in different regions navigate these dynamics, especially during periods of reorganization. In this study, we draw upon Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede et al., 2005) and Schein's organizational culture model (Schein, 2004) to explore the role of national and organizational cultures in shaping global IT interactions. By integrating these cultural perspectives with Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), which focuses on the discursive tensions inherent in human interactions, we offer a comprehensive framework to understand cultural tensions in globally distributed IT teams.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how national culture affects organizational behavior (Fang et al., 2016). The six dimensions – power distance, individualism vs collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs femininity, long-term vs short-term orientation, and indulgence vs restraint – provide a useful lens through which to analyze how cultural values shape responses to organizational change in different regions. For example, in high power distance cultures, employees may resist decentralization efforts, as such moves challenge hierarchical norms deeply embedded in their culture. In contrast, collectivist cultures tend to emphasize group cohesion and harmony, which can create friction in situations where organizational change demands individual innovation and adaptability. These dimensions help explain why IT professionals

from different cultural backgrounds may react differently to global IT reorganizations, particularly when local values conflict with the standardized processes imposed by multinational firms.

In addition to Hofstede's national cultural framework (Hofstede et al., 2005), Schein's organizational culture model emphasizes how culture operates at three levels within organizations: artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). Artifacts are the visible elements of culture, such as office layout, technology use, and dress codes (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006). Espoused values refer to the official principles that guide an organization, while underlying assumptions are the deeply ingrained beliefs that shape behavior. In global IT reorganizations, these cultural layers often clash, as local IT units must reconcile their long-standing assumptions with the new processes and technologies introduced by global headquarters. For instance, while espoused values in a global IT firm may promote innovation and autonomy, the underlying assumptions in certain local contexts may prioritize stability and hierarchical control, leading to tensions between local and global units.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) complements these cultural frameworks by offering a means to analyze the discursive tensions that arise when competing cultural values intersect. Initially developed to understand interpersonal dynamics, RDT is grounded in the notion that meaning-making emerges from the interaction of opposing forces or discourses. In global IT organizations, these discursive tensions manifest as conflicts between autonomy versus control, inclusion versus exclusion, and empowerment versus disempowerment (Gibbs, 2009). For instance, in Western IT environments, discourses of innovation and autonomy are often dominant, while in other regions, discourses emphasizing control and stability may take precedence (Bader & Kaiser, 2017). These cultural discourses – much like interpersonal ones – are continuously negotiated and contested in the workplace. RDT's concepts of centripetal (dominant) and centrifugal (marginalized) discourses provide a useful framework for understanding how local and global tensions are navigated during IT reorganizations.

In this study, we adapt RDT to address the cultural tensions that arise in global IT environments, focusing on how organizational discourses reflect larger cultural struggles between global corporate standards and local cultural values (Davenport, 1998; Goodhue et al., 1992). The cultural tensions examined in this study arise from the intersection of global corporate standards (which reflect organizational culture) and the local cultural values of different regions (which reflect national culture). National culture is analyzed through frameworks like Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which highlights how regional differences (e.g., power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance) shape workers' attitudes toward organizational change. At the same time, the study also explores organizational culture, particularly through Schein's organizational culture model, to understand how companies' internal norms, practices, and values influence IT professionals' experiences during reorganization efforts. By integrating both perspectives, the study provides a more comprehensive view of how cultural tensions manifest in multinational IT environments, where national cultural differences interact with global organizational goals and practices.

While RDT traditionally focuses on the discursive interplay within relationships, our study extends its application to organizational settings by examining how cultural discourses are negotiated in global IT teams (Baxter, 2011). We selected RDT 2.0 as the primary framework for this study because of its unique ability to analyze the discursive-material interplay in the cultural tensions central to global IT reorganizations. RDT 2.0 offers a dynamic lens through which to explore contradictions – particularly between local autonomy and global control – which are critical to understanding how IT professionals navigate organizational change in culturally diverse environments. Unlike more static, essentialist theories of culture that often view cultural dynamics as fixed, RDT 2.0 enables us to focus on the ongoing negotiation of meaning that occurs in real-time within organizations (Baxter, 2011). This is essential for our case study, as cultural tensions are not singular, one-time events, but evolve continuously through the interactions between global corporate mandates and local cultural values. RDT's emphasis on discursive tensions provides a framework for analyzing how these cultural conflicts are not just resisted or adopted but actively contested, negotiated, and redefined in everyday practices. Furthermore, RDT's concept of centripetal (dominant) and centrifugal (marginalized)

discourses is particularly relevant for analyzing the tensions between global standards and local practices in multinational organizations. It allows us to examine how dominant global discourses (such as innovation and efficiency) might clash with or marginalize local discourses (such as stability and tradition) during an IT reorganization, and how IT professionals navigate this complex interplay.

The integration of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Schein's organizational culture model, and RDT enables a multi-dimensional analysis of cultural tensions in global IT work. Hofstede's dimensions provide insights into how national cultures shape workers' attitudes toward change and authority, while Schein's model reveals how organizational culture operates at multiple levels, from surface artifacts to deeply ingrained assumptions. By combining these perspectives with RDT, we gain a nuanced understanding of how discursive tensions – rooted in both national and organizational cultures – play out in the context of global IT reorganization. For example, in a reorganization where decentralized decision-making is introduced, workers in high power distance cultures may perceive this as a threat to established authority structures. Simultaneously, these workers may experience a tension between the dominant global discourse advocating for autonomy and the local discourse that values stability and control. By using RDT to analyze these discourses, we can better understand how IT professionals navigate these cultural contradictions and adapt their behaviors accordingly. RDT 2.0 provides a flexible, non-essentialist framework for understanding how cultural tensions are negotiated in practice, making it ideally suited to explore the dynamic contradictions inherent in global IT work.

To further enhance our understanding of cultural tensions, we also incorporate sociomateriality, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of material and discursive practices in the workplace (Orlikowski & Scott, 2015). Sociomateriality challenges the notion that technology, cultural norms, and human actions can be analyzed separately, arguing instead that they are intertwined and mutually constitutive. In the context of global IT work, this means that cultural tensions cannot be understood solely through discursive analysis; they must also be examined in relation to material practices such as technology use, infrastructure, and workspace design. For instance, as IT professionals engage with new technologies introduced by global headquarters, the materiality of the technology – its design, capabilities, and constraints – interacts with the cultural discourses that shape how workers perceive and use these tools. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, workers may resist adopting new technologies that are perceived as unstable or unfamiliar, further complicating efforts to align local practices with global standards. By considering the material and discursive dimensions together, we offer a more holistic understanding of how cultural tensions are navigated in global IT work.

The intersection of these frameworks – Hofstede's dimensions, Schein's organizational model, RDT, and sociomateriality – allows us to explore cultural tensions across different regions and organizational settings. In Asia, hierarchical structures often complicate the implementation of decentralized IT systems, while in North America, firms may struggle to balance the autonomy afforded by digital tools with the control expected by corporate governance. In Europe, cultural tensions around privacy and control play a central role in shaping digital transformation efforts. Meanwhile, in regions like Latin America and India, workers frequently encounter tensions arising from stereotypes and power imbalances between onshore and offshore IT units (Brooks et al., 2020; Levina & Orlikowski, 2009).

By adopting this discursive-material perspective, our study provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the cultural tensions that permeate global IT work. The integration of cultural frameworks and discursive analysis offers valuable insights into how IT professionals navigate competing global and local demands, allowing organizations to develop more adaptive strategies for managing cultural complexity during reorganizations.

Research methodology

Case description

This case study examines the relationship challenges in the aftermath of a global IT integration by a global telecommunications company (GTF) and its impact on a subsidiary based in Southern Africa

(LTF). The IT unit of LTF is based in its regional headquarters in Johannesburg and is responsible for IT in South Africa, Tanzania, the DRC, Lesotho and Mozambique. Headquartered in the United Kingdom, GTF has a significant global presence in over 30 countries, organized in three geographic regions, Europe, Africa, and Central Europe; the Asia Pacific and the Middle East; and the US. Historically, GTF granted considerable autonomy to its subsidiaries. In recent years, GTF embarked on a fundamental transformation program for its global IT landscape. The primary goal of the IT integration was to leverage GTF's scale to generate savings through the consolidation and centralization of core IT activities.

Furthermore, GTF wanted to improve the sharing of IT expertise and experience, provide access to world-class technologies, procure technologies through the global company, and standardize IT operations in all subsidiaries. Within the LTF's IT divisions, the focus has been on IT integration. GTF's goals were to standardize systems and processes within the enterprise to drive simplicity and standardize the systems and operational landscapes to implement economies of scale and lower operating and capital expenditures. Core examples of aligning local IT with global platforms included integrating the LTF's active directory (AD) domain into the GTF's AD. Furthermore, the LTF's SAP-based HR system was integrated with the global organization's hosted finance, enterprise resource planning (ERP) and HR suite of products. As part of this integration, the LTF's Oracle-based financial and ERP systems were replaced.

This study focuses on the impact of a global IT reorganization on a local IT unit. Even though the reorganization was almost complete, it still weighed heavily on the minds of the IT workers. The continued global IT reorganization remains heavily dependent on the commitment of the LTF's IT workers. We conceptualize cultural tensions to involve materiality and culture, as well as language and subjective perceptions (Mingers et al., 2013; Wynn & Williams, 2012). "Social practices are concept-dependent; but, contrary to the hermeneutical tradition in social science, they are not exhausted by their conceptual aspect. They always have a material dimension" (Bhaskar 1989, p. 4). While this study shares some of the assumptions of interpretivism by focusing on situated and consensual understanding, meanings, and local emergence (Klein & Myers, 1999; Walsham, 2006), it also emphasizes dissensus (Deetz, 1992). We argue that this emphasis may overlook critical aspects of global team dynamics, particularly the dualities and tensions that are pivotal in shaping interactions and responses during the reorganization of a global IT unit.

Data collection

Informants consisted of IT professionals working in a specific IT division in the South African LTF. The selected participants all worked in four departments of the IT Services Division: IT Services, IT Networks, End-User Computing and Unified Communications. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the departments, their function, and the number of participants per department. We selected these departments due to the significant impact the IT integration process had on them. One of the authors conducted all the interviews. Eight interviews were conducted using face-to-face interviews, and ten were conducted using Skype for Business. All the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach. An interview guide (See Appendix A) was used to ask informants about their involvement in the global IT integration process, their reflections on the process, their coping strategies, the support they received from management, and finally their commitment. The duration of the interviews ranged from 36 to 83 minutes, averaging approximately 52 minutes. To ensure compliance with the research institution's ethics process, approval was required and granted by LTF. All informants were employed at LTF for five or more years.

Although the study focuses exclusively on participants from the LTF side without including interviews from the GTF side, this limitation does not detract from the primary goal of the research. The main objective was to capture the lived experiences of the local workforce at LTF and understand the cultural challenges they encountered during the global IT integration process. By concentrating on

Table 1. Participants by department and organizational roles.

Department	Role in organization	Number of participants per department
IT Services	Supports the technology infrastructure across the LTF enterprise.	4
IT Networks	Deploys and supports the IT network infrastructure across the LTF enterprise, including African subsidiaries.	4
End-User Computing	Manage IT procurement and end-user computing affecting programs and projects, as well as front-office IT support for LTF.	5
Unified Communications	Deploys and supports telephony, audio-visual, exchange (email) and unified communications technology and infrastructure across the entire LTF enterprise, including federation and integration with the African subsidiaries.	5

Table 2. The designations of participants.

Role	Number of participants
Divisional executive	1
Departmental managers	4
Principle specialists	1
Senior specialists	2
Specialists	7
Senior technical officers (STO)	3
Total	18

the South African context, the study provides rich, in-depth insights into how local employees navigated the cultural and operational tensions that arose from integrating global and local IT frameworks (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). Including GTF participants, while valuable, would have shifted the emphasis away from the specific cultural and organizational dynamics affecting LTF employees, which was the core focus of this investigation.

Data analysis

We employed a contrapuntal analysis on the interview data (Baxter, 2011, pp. 161–164), a discourse analysis method that identifies the interplay between competing discourses. According to Baxter (2011), contrapuntal analysis involves three key steps: (1) identifying the discourses, (2) determining whether the discourses are in competition, and (3) analyzing the interplay between these competing discourses. To aid in the identification of discourses, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for identifying thematic categories. Both authors independently read the dataset multiple times to ensure a deep understanding of the content before generating an initial set of thematic categories. This independent process was followed by collaboration with an independent judge, ensuring that a comprehensive and exhaustive list of codes was created, reflecting multiple perspectives.

We performed line-by-line coding to capture emergent themes such as "loss of influence," "from leaders to followers," and "enslavement." To reflect the complexity of the interview data, our analysis incorporated both discursive and material elements, coding for not only discourses but also for material aspects (e.g., "office space," "technology," "applications") and embodied experiences (e.g., "feeling frustrated," "feeling stressed," "face-to-face meetings"). This discursive-material approach enhanced our understanding of cultural tensions by recognizing that the physical and emotional contexts in which participants operate are essential to shaping their experiences.

Our analysis was iterative, continuously comparing emerging themes with the interview data to ensure thematic saturation. Although we conducted 18 interviews, we estimate that saturation was reached by the 15th interview, with no new themes emerging in subsequent interviews. This iterative process ensured that the analysis was both rigorous and exhaustive, as themes were revisited until a deep and thorough understanding was achieved (Yin, 2009).

The identified themes were then grouped into discursive subtensions for deeper analysis. For instance, the theme of "loss of influence" was translated into the discursive subtension of "strategic position versus compliant position." We grouped subtensions into larger tensions, such as autonomy versus control, to provide a structured understanding of the cultural conflicts at play. Existing studies on dialectics, paradox, and ambidexterity were drawn upon to refine the labels and our overall understanding of these tensions.

In analyzing the discursive interplay between competing discourses, we followed Baxter's (2011) recommendation to focus on how dominant (centripetal) and marginalized (centrifugal) discourses interpenetrate. However, our approach extended Baxter's relational dialectics model by incorporating sociomateriality, focusing not only on discursive struggles but also on how material practices (e.g., technology, infrastructure) influence these discourses. This broader discursive-material conception provided a more comprehensive understanding of cultural tensions in global IT workplaces.

In the final phase of our analysis, we examined how IT workers responded to the tensions they experienced, particularly the coping strategies they adopted to navigate these cultural conflicts. These strategies were essential in understanding how individuals managed the pressures of competing global and local discourses. We paid close attention to variations across participants, acknowledging that their strategies reflected different positionalities within the organizational hierarchy.

To ensure a deeper understanding of the discursive tensions, we employed informant triangulation (Myers, 2009) by gathering perspectives from various local IT units, including departmental managers and technical specialists. Triangulation was not intended to smooth over divergent experiences but to provide a richer and more nuanced picture of the cultural tensions and adaptive strategies across departments. This approach allowed us to capture a comprehensive view of how different roles within the IT unit engaged with these tensions.

We utilized ATLAS.ti software throughout the analysis to systematically organize and manage the large dataset. This facilitated multiple iterations of coding and theme development, allowing us to map out the complex network of discursive tensions and the associated adaptive strategies. After thorough analysis, the discursive tensions and coping strategies were identified and are presented in Figure 1. By following these multi-layered, rigorous steps, we ensured that the data analysis was thorough, allowing us to capture the rich and complex interplay of cultural tensions in the global IT reorganization.

Results

After several iterations, we identified the primary cultural tension as one between *autonomy versus control*, reflecting the overarching conflict experienced by the local IT unit in response to global IT reorganization efforts. This tension is analyzed through Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and Schein's organizational culture model, supported by Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) to explain the dynamic and evolving nature of the cultural negotiations at play. While Hofstede and Schein provide a framework for understanding the cultural foundations of these tensions, RDT offers insight into how these tensions are discursively negotiated over time.

Workplace flexibility versus workspace standardization

The tension between workplace flexibility and workspace standardization encapsulates a clash between GTF's efforts to standardize workspaces globally and the local unit's expectations of privacy and hierarchy. According to Hofstede's power distance dimension, employees in high-power distance cultures like South Africa expect clear markers of status and respect within the workplace, such as private offices for senior personnel. As Paul, a departmental manager, explained, "Before we had offices and now we do not have offices anymore . . . That new way of working from GTF, you know, it works for them in Europe. It is not something that works in South Africa." Here, Schein's organizational culture model further illustrates the artifacts and espoused values in conflict. GTF's standardized open-plan office model represents a shift in the artifacts that traditionally marked status in the

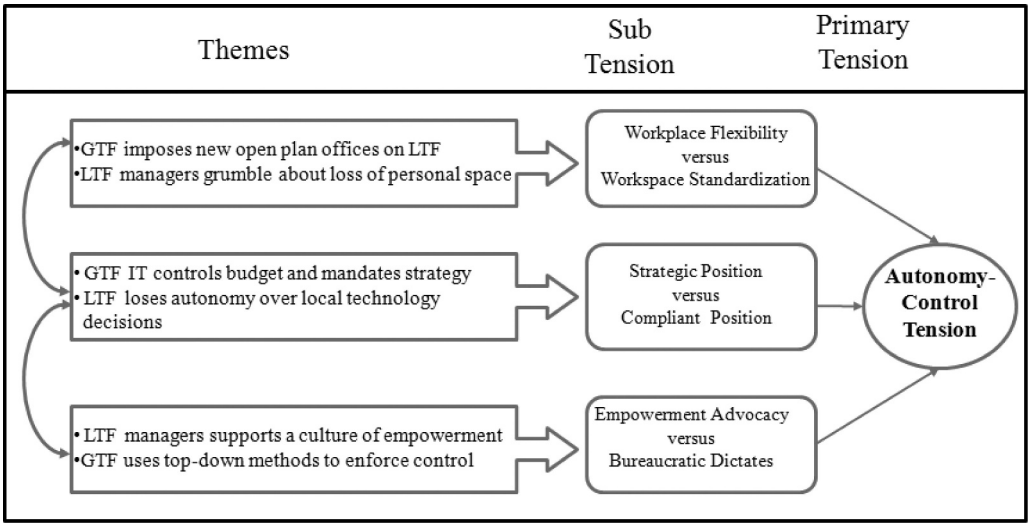

Figure 1. Data structure: cultural tensions.

local unit, while the underlying assumptions of local workers – emphasizing privacy, autonomy, and prestige – were disrupted. Through the lens of RDT, this clash can be understood as a discursive struggle between the centripetal discourse of global standardization (dominant, imposed by GTF) and the centrifugal discourse of local flexibility and autonomy (marginalized). This tension was not merely a physical restructuring but a discursive-material conflict, reflecting a deeper cultural negotiation between local and global values.

Strategic position versus compliant position

The tension between strategic autonomy and a compliant position reveals a discursive struggle where local employees, once empowered to lead technology initiatives, now felt constrained by GTF's top-down directives. Tom, a core principal specialist, expressed this frustration: "So, where previously we could workshop this and achieve our own strategies, now you participate in the greater scheme of things and you are kind of enslaved." Through Hofstede's individualism vs collectivism dimension, this shift represents a movement away from the local individualistic culture, where employees prized autonomy and innovation, toward a more collectivist, compliance-driven approach favored by GTF. This shift can be further understood through Schein's model as the local unit's previous culture of leadership and empowerment (espoused values) was replaced by a culture of compliance, diminishing the underlying assumptions of ownership and strategic influence. From an RDT perspective, this change reflects a discursive tension between the centrifugal discourse of local strategic autonomy and the centripetal discourse of global compliance. The local discourse, which once emphasized innovation and leadership, was subordinated to GTF's standardized control, highlighting an ongoing negotiation of meaning between the local and global units.

Empowerment advocacy versus Bureaucratic Dictates

The tension between empowerment advocacy and bureaucratic dictates reflects a discursive-material conflict arising from GTF's global control measures. Previously, local managers had the autonomy to make decisions and shape their strategies. Patrick, head of the IT division, reminisced, "When we were LTF, we were more empowered … we were allowed to make decisions, and it was a strategy we were involved in and we actually developed." Through

Schein's model, this shift from empowerment to bureaucratic control reflects a change in the artifacts (e.g., decision-making processes), which undermined the espoused values of autonomy and the underlying assumptions that local managers had about their roles. As GTF imposed stricter procurement and operational policies, the local unit's cultural values were increasingly replaced by bureaucratic dictates, contributing to a sense of cultural dissonance. From an RDT perspective, this tension can be understood as a discursive struggle between the centrifugal discourse of local empowerment and the centripetal discourse of GTF's bureaucratic efficiency. Local employees experienced this as a clash between their desire to retain local autonomy and the imposition of global corporate control, which eroded their sense of cultural identity and empowerment.

Negotiating cultural tensions

Using RDT to understand how employees negotiated these discursive tensions, four key adaptive strategies emerged: *departure, acceptance, collaboration, and persistent resistance*. These strategies reflect the ways in which local employees navigated the ongoing dialectical tensions between local autonomy and global control, shaped by both national and organizational cultural frameworks. For some employees, the decision to leave was a rejection of the dominant global discourse. This reflects a cultural assertion of autonomy and innovation, as these employees sought environments that aligned with their values of self-determination and professional fulfillment, resonating with Hofstede's individualism dimension. Others, like Kushal, accepted the global reorganization as a means to enhance their careers within a larger global framework. "I see it as a way to enhance my career from an international perspective with the GTF," he noted. This acceptance strategy represents a realignment of local employees' values with the global discourse, reflecting Schein's concept of cultural adaptation as they adjusted their espoused values to fit the new global reality. For some, collaboration emerged as a resilience strategy, where employees sought to leverage their global connections and shared knowledge. Tom remarked, "Collaboration is the key here . . . whether with your line management or with your counterparts in GTF." This strategy indicates a cultural shift toward collectivism, where employees embraced interdependence, aligning with Hofstede's collectivism dimension and signaling a move from autonomy to teamwork. For others, like Paul, resistance was a way to preserve their local cultural values. Paul reflected, "I also have my own things to try and put down . . . we have managed." This reflects RDT's centrifugal force, where marginalized local discourses of autonomy and control continued to resist the dominant global narrative, illustrating how cultural tensions were not fully resolved but actively negotiated.

Discussion

Our case study reveals cultural tensions between *autonomy and control* within a local IT unit in Southern Africa undergoing a reorganization as part of a global IT work arrangement. While the specific findings are grounded in the context of our case study, the cultural tensions identified—*workplace flexibility vs workspace standardization, strategic vs compliant positioning, and empowerment advocacy vs bureaucratic dictates*—are not unique to this region. In fact, similar dynamics have been observed in global IT operations in other regions.

For example, our study's findings align with broader observations about the complexities of global IT integration in emerging markets, such as Latin America. As Reinhard (2015) points out, countries like Brazil exhibit an openness and willingness to adopt foreign practices, often driven by social prestige or compliance with global market standards. This adaptability, however, comes with significant cultural challenges. In the case of Brazil, the growing influence of multinational companies from North America and Europe – along with Brazilian managers educated abroad – does not erase local cultural dynamics. Similarly, in our South African context, we observe that the introduction of global IT standards by the global headquarters

(GTF) brings its own cultural frameworks, leading to cultural tensions between the need to adhere to global norms and the desire to preserve local business values (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001).

Similar dynamics have been observed globally, as multinational IT organizations impose global standards on local subsidiaries, which leads to conflicts between local practices and global frameworks. For example, our study also resonates with Jacks' (2017) discussion of Institutional Logics (IL), which argues that global IT systems are shaped by socially constructed institutions such as the market, corporation, and community. The IL perspective suggests that both symbolic systems (such as culture) and material practices (such as policies and procedures) influence organizational behavior. In our study, the tensions between global control and local autonomy are emblematic of the broader institutional logics at play, where multinational corporations attempt to standardize operations across diverse cultural contexts. However, while IL provides a macro-level framework for understanding these dynamics, our study focuses more on the micro-level experiences of IT professionals who must navigate these tensions daily.

Similarly, in India, one of the leading destinations for IT outsourcing, IT professionals also grapple with global control imposed by Western clients, often facing tensions between the local desire for autonomy and compliance with global standardized systems (Ravishankar et al., 2013). Research from Eastern Europe also highlights how global IT workers experience frustration over reduced local innovation due to global mandates, echoing the tensions of strategic autonomy vs global compliance observed in our study (Leonardi & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2013). In these cases, as in our study, IT professionals employ adaptive strategies such as collaboration with the global headquarters, acceptance of new roles, or persistent resistance to imposed changes.

Our study reveals that the autonomy versus control dilemma plays a central role in shaping the experiences of IT professionals in a globally distributed work environment. However, there are notable differences in how these tensions play out across regions. In countries like Germany or the United States, where IT professionals tend to have more autonomy and decision-making power within global organizations, the cultural tensions between autonomy and control may manifest differently (Hofstede et al., 2005). Instead of navigating rigid hierarchical control, workers in these regions may experience tensions related to balancing global coordination with a strong local innovation culture (Kotlarsky et al., 2014). The multicultural teams in these regions might focus more on negotiating role flexibility and workplace adaptability rather than simply complying with global standardization. However, it is important to recognize that the intensity and manifestation of this tension can vary significantly depending on the cultural context of the region where the IT work is situated. For instance, in high-power-distance countries like China, the relationship between autonomy and control is likely to be experienced and negotiated differently compared to low-power-distance countries in Western Europe (Schiller & Cui, 2010).

In high-power-distance countries, such as China, the cultural expectation is often that authority and control are centralized, and there is generally a greater acceptance of hierarchical structures and top-down decision-making (Fang et al., 2016). In such contexts, employees may be more accustomed to, and even expect, strong directives from global headquarters (GTF), which might reduce the perceived tension between autonomy and control. Rather than viewing global mandates as an infringement on local autonomy, IT workers in high-power-distance cultures may interpret them as part of the normal hierarchical order, where obedience and compliance are valued cultural norms (Hofstede, 1980; Myers & Tan, 2002).

However, this does not mean that cultural tensions are absent. In China, for example, while IT workers may be more willing to accept bureaucratic control, they could still experience tension in the form of workplace flexibility versus standardization (Schiller & Cui, 2010). In this context, flexibility might be desired at the operational level, especially when dealing with local clients or unique market conditions, but the pressure to comply with standardized global practices can constrain local innovation and agility (Ravishankar et al., 2013). This could lead to subtle forms of resistance or quiet adaptations that challenge global mandates without outright defiance.

Additionally, the strategic versus compliant positioning dilemma may manifest less overtly in high-power-distance contexts. Local IT professionals may express less frustration with compliance-oriented roles and instead look for informal ways to exercise strategic influence, such as through personal relationships (guanxi) with supervisors or global counterparts (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998). The adaptation strategies in such contexts may focus on collaboration and acceptance, rather than direct resistance or departure, as hierarchical obedience is culturally ingrained.

Moreover, the cultural responses we observed in our case study – acceptance, collaboration, resistance, and departure – are also reflected in global IT work settings elsewhere, but the specific manifestations of these responses vary. In Western Europe, IT workers have been found to employ collaborative strategies more readily, viewing global integration as an opportunity to develop intercultural competencies (Gregory & Keil, 2014). By contrast, in emerging markets like Brazil or Vietnam, workers may view global mandates as an infringement on local identities and norms, leading to more resistance or passive disengagement (Ashford et al., 2018).

While Chinese workers might prioritize compliance and cooperation with global standards, South African IT professionals showed a tendency to collaborate while simultaneously advocating for empowerment and local decision-making (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). Another key difference is the collectivist ethos that underpins both South African Ubuntu and Chinese Confucian values (Fang et al., 2016). In China, this ethos often supports a top-down approach, where individuals are seen as part of a greater whole, and their role is to contribute to the success of the collective through compliance with authority (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998). In South Africa, however, collectivism is more about community collaboration and shared responsibility, which gives autonomy a greater role within teams. This means that, while South African workers may accept global mandates, they are more likely to negotiate these mandates rather than simply comply, reflecting the unique blend of communalism and autonomy that characterizes South African organizational culture (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001).

In contrast, Western European cultures such as those in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands are defined by low power distance and a strong expectation of autonomy in the workplace. Western European IT professionals expect to be actively involved in strategic decision-making, and any global control measures imposed by headquarters are often met with resistance or negotiation (Kotlarsky et al., 2014). This makes the autonomy versus control tension more intense in Europe, where IT workers are less likely to passively accept control and more likely to assert their autonomy. In South Africa, the intensity of this tension is more moderate (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). While there is frustration with global mandates, as observed in our case study, South African IT workers tend to adapt through collaborative efforts rather than outright resistance. Unlike their European counterparts, who may resist control vocally or seek formal mechanisms for influence, South African IT workers are more likely to engage in pragmatic collaboration, finding ways to balance global control with local autonomy (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). This collaborative adaptation is a key feature of the South African cultural context, where the desire for community and collaboration tempers resistance. Over time, this leads to gradual adjustments rather than immediate confrontations, as seen in some Western European workplaces.

The cultural tensions observed in our study – workplace flexibility vs standardization, strategic vs compliant positioning, and empowerment vs bureaucratic dictates – are shaped by South Africa's unique post-apartheid culture, which is a blend of authoritative and collaborative elements (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). The autonomy vs control tension manifests as a push-pull dynamic, where local IT professionals seek to maintain autonomy while recognizing the global realities that require adherence to global standards. While South Africa shares some cultural characteristics with both high-power-distance countries like China and low-power-distance countries like those in Western Europe, its cultural dynamics around autonomy and control are unique (Lutz, 2009; Mangaliso, 2001). South African IT workers engage in pragmatic collaboration with global headquarters, negotiating cultural tensions in ways that balance respect for authority with a desire for local decision-making. This moderate approach contrasts with the more compliance-oriented culture in China and the resistance-

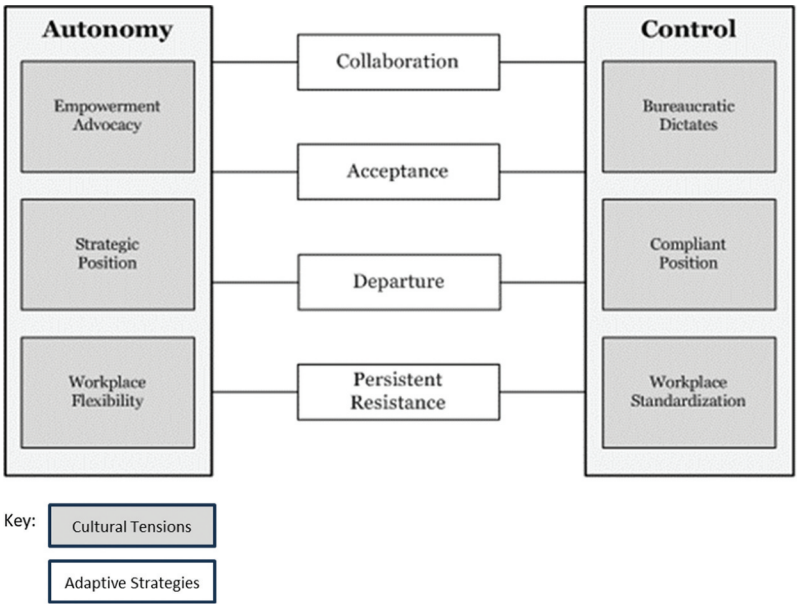

Figure 2. A global it cultural tensions and adaptation Model.

driven dynamics in Western Europe, highlighting the importance of understanding regional cultural differences when managing global IT reorganizations.

The Cultural Tensions Adaptation Model (Figure 2) we propose offers a lens for understanding the discursive and material practices underlying these cultural tensions in IT work arrangements. While our findings stem from a Southern African context, the model is highly relevant to other multinational IT organizations operating in diverse cultural environments. Thus, the applicability of our findings may vary depending on the organizational culture and national cultural norms that influence how global IT work is structured and managed (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006). Nevertheless, our findings emphasize the importance of understanding cultural tensions in multinational IT organizations, particularly in the context of global IT reorganizations. Future research could extend our model to examine how these cultural tensions are negotiated in different regional contexts, accounting for varying levels of organizational autonomy, national cultural differences, and work role expectations. As global IT work continues to evolve, the need to balance global control with local cultural values will become increasingly important for fostering successful collaboration and integration across regions.

In conclusion, while the specific cultural tensions observed in our study are rooted in a Southern African IT unit, the broader implications of our findings are applicable to global IT work environments across a variety of regions. These tensions reflect a global phenomenon where cultural identity, autonomy, and control remain central challenges for IT professionals navigating the complex realities of global IT integration.

Conclusion

Implications for theory

Our study contributes to theory in several important ways: First, our conceptualization of cultural tensions aligns with but also diverges from Hofstede's conceptualization of national culture (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 2005; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006; Shore & Venkatachalam, 1995). For instance, the tension between empowerment and bureaucratic controls resonates with Hofstede's dimension of power distance, suggesting that cultures with relatively low power distance expect greater

empowerment and egalitarian management practices in Global IT, whereas high power distance cultures may be more accepting of hierarchical control and bureaucratic structures (Bagchi et al., 2004; Jayaprakash & Pillai, 2021). Moreover, unlike Hofstede's static dimensions, these cultural tensions are specifically contextualized within the dynamics of globally distributed IT work and organizational reorganization (Myers & Tan, 2002; Walsh et al., 2010). They reflect the immediate challenges and negotiations within the organizational change process, offering a more granular view of how cultural differences play out in global IT reorganizations (Weisinger & Trauth, 2002). These cultural tensions also deepen our understanding of organizational and occupational subcultures not explicitly covered by Hofstede's dimensions (Chu et al., 2019; Asatiani et al., 2021; Cranefield et al., 2022). For example, the tension between empowerment and bureaucratic controls also highlights the cultural dynamics within organizations and the IT profession that values autonomy and innovation versus those occupational cultures that prioritize structure and uniformity (Jacks & Palvia, 2014). In addition, our conceptualization of cultural tensions extends beyond the national-level and occupational cultural traits by having a direct operational focus, addressing how cultural dynamics influence daily work practices, decision-making processes, and strategic orientations in a global IT setting.

Furthermore, the emphasis on negotiation and adaptation within our cultural tensions model is similar to recent IS studies that highlight the relational and transactional aspects of culture in organizational settings (Myers & Tan, 2002; Ravishankar et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2010). It underscores the ongoing adjustments and compromises that individuals, groups and organizations make in response to cultural differences, which is a more fluid and interactive view of culture than traditional cultural models suggest (Bagchi et al., 2004). While there are parallels between these cultural tensions and Hofstede's dimensions of national culture – particularly around concepts of power, individualism, and uncertainty – our relational dialectics perspective of cultural tensions provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges of managing cultural dynamics within global IT organizations offering insights into the immediate, operational, and relational aspects of culture that are specific to the context of IT work and organizational change.

Second, this study extends upon prior work on discursive tensions by specifying struggles and opportunities that are more salient in globally distributed IT work arrangements. RDT refers to *autonomy-connection, novelty-predictability, and openness-closedness* as the three fundamental discursive tensions that apply to interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 2011; Fox et al., 2014). Similarly, research on dialectics in global software teams refers to three main discursive tensions: *autonomy-connectedness, inclusion-exclusion, and empowerment-disempowerment* (Gibbs, 2009). While our model also confirms the importance of autonomy in global work relations, it moves beyond the emphasis on connectedness reported in these perspectives (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Gibbs, 2009). For example, "red tape" and the resulting emphasis on control rather than connection reflected in our empirical data and referred to in our model is arguably more faithful to the context of changing global IT work arrangements than autonomy-connection struggles experienced in interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships (Gregory & Keil, 2014; Gregory et al., 2013).

Third, this research contributes to broadening our understanding of cultural tensions in the globally distributed IT workplace (Gibbs, 2009). The proposed discursive-material approach "materializes" the concept of cultural tensions and moves scholars beyond the socio-cultural – material divide (Barrett et al., 2016; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014). Studying how materiality and discourse intersect in changing organizational arrangements to reconstruct IT work roles and negotiate role expectations can also inform future studies on workplace adaptation and resistance to change research in IS (Cramton & Hinds, 2014). For example, the reconfiguration of physical and digital workspaces and the standardization of technologies, in our case, were not just practical adjustments (Goodhue et al., 1992) but also carried symbolic meanings that either aligned with or challenged the cultural values and norms within the local and global unit. Building on Schein's model of organizational culture, our study illuminates how cultural tensions are rooted in the three layers of culture – that is, artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). For example, the introduction of open-plan offices by GTF represents a shift in artifacts that signaled a move toward workspace standardization (Dale,

2005). This change conflicted with the local unit's espoused values of privacy and status, where private offices served as symbols of seniority and respect, aligned with a high-power distance culture. The underlying assumptions – deeply held beliefs about hierarchy, autonomy, and control – were thus disrupted, contributing to tensions between the global corporate model and local organizational practices.

Fourth, our research into cultural tensions increases our awareness of evolving work roles and adaptive strategies for managing discursive-material struggles (Baptista et al., 2020; Gibbs, 2009; Koppman et al., 2016). Our findings confirm that a major reorganization could create a crisis in the meaning of many IT workers (Koppman et al., 2016). Our findings also support prior studies that have argued for the importance of acceptance and commitment in general human adaptive and resilience strategies (Wong, 2012). To cope, in our case, IT workers also use departure, persistent resistance, and collaboration to renew meaning in their work lives. Finally, our study builds upon and extends existing research on cultural dynamics within the domain of global IT management by offering insights into multiple cultural layers that exist in contemporary organizations – national, organizational, and occupational (Jackson, 2012; Walsh et al., 2010). Like previous cultural studies on the global workplace, our study shows that national cultures can significantly impact attitudes toward hierarchy and authority. For instance, IT workers from different countries potentially have varying expectations about autonomy, decision-making, and collaboration based on their cultural backgrounds. Understanding these national cultural differences is crucial for managing and integrating globally distributed teams effectively, ensuring that policies and practices respect and leverage cultural diversity. Prior global IT studies have shown how organizational culture shapes employees' perceptions and behaviors, including how they respond to changes and challenges. In a globally distributed IT unit, differences in organizational cultures between units (e.g., headquarters vs. local units) can lead to tensions and misunderstandings. Understanding these differences can help in devising strategies that align organizational practices and values across all units, fostering a cohesive culture. Lastly, prior studies have also shown how the norms, values, and practices of the occupational culture are shared by individuals within the same profession (Jacks & Palvia, 2014). In our case, there was a shared value and norms on innovation, technical excellence, and agility within the local unit that intensified tensions with the global unit. Our study confirms that occupational culture can influence how IT workers perceive their roles, their commitment to professional development, and their reactions to organizational change (Jacks & Palvia, 2014). Recognizing how occupational values and norms influence cultural tensions can aid in aligning global IT strategies with the intrinsic motivations and expectations of IT professionals (Ravishankar, 2015).

Implications for practice

Cultural tensions are influencing the work lives of IT workers in globally distributed workplaces in indeterminate, contradictory, and dramatic ways. Understanding how workers adapt to disruptive work environments and cope with emerging cultural tensions using adaptive strategies has important practical applications (Cramton & Hinds, 2014). Our findings highlight the potential cultural tensions within global IT reorganizations and pave the way for developing strategies that global IT leaders can employ to mitigate these tensions and foster a more inclusive and harmonious work environment. As depicted in Table 3, our model suggests that global IT managers should adopt a more participatory approach in strategy formulation, involving local IT units in the decision-making process. This can help balance the autonomy-control tension by acknowledging and leveraging the unique insights and capabilities of local teams. A practical application of this would be the establishment of cross-cultural task forces that bring together representatives from both global headquarters and local units to co-create digital transformation strategies. This collaborative approach ensures that global standards do not overshadow local innovations and that the reorganization efforts are sensitive to the diverse cultural contexts within which the organization operates (Gibbs, 2009; Koppman et al., 2016). By integrating these practices, organizations can move toward a global IT culture that values diversity,

Table 3. Managing cultural tensions in global-local it reorganizations.

Cultural tensions	Tensions in global IT work arrangements	Recommendations for managing tensions
Workplace flexibility versus standardization	The global IT unit's move to open-plan offices was aimed at fostering a culture of flexibility and collaboration. However, local IT managers and technical workers perceive this as a clash with cultural norms valuing privacy, personal space, and quiet for concentration. This tension reflects broader cultural differences in perceptions of ideal work environments. The reconfiguration of physical and digital workspaces and the standardization of technologies were not just practical adjustments but also carried symbolic meanings that challenged the cultural values and norms within local and global units.	Global IT leaders should encourage participative design processes that involve employees from both global and local units in workspace planning. This approach should aim to balance the need for collaborative spaces with areas that respect individual work preferences and cultural norms around privacy and focus. Design symbols of collaboration that resonate culturally across all units, that is, tangible or intangible markers that embody the spirit of teamwork and unity and alignment within the diverse cultural context of a global IT organization.
Strategic *versus* compliant position	The global IT unit's centralization of digital strategy overshadowed the cultural insights and practices inherent in local units, leading to a potential underutilization of localized knowledge. This top-down approach risked silencing diverse cultural perspectives on digital innovation and future technology trends, making local units feel their contributions were being marginalized. A solely directive approach from the global unit neglected these valuable cultural dimensions of digitization capability. The imposition of a global strategy seemed to dilute the sense of purpose among local IT workers, distancing them from the collective objectives of the organization's digital transformation efforts.	Global IT leaders should develop digitalization strategies through culturally diverse steering committees that ensure representation from all geographical locations. This approach recognizes and values the cultural diversity within the organization, integrating a wide range of cultural insights and practices into strategic planning. Use culturally relevant symbols and practices, such as storytelling or local wisdom-sharing circles, to deepen understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural contributions to digital strategies. Reorganization initiatives should promote local digitalization labs where teams can innovate and experiment within the context of their cultural norms and values and then share their findings and prototypes in a global showcase. This not only leverages local expertise but also celebrates cultural diversity as a source of innovation.
Empowerment *versus* bureaucratic controls	Workers view the exercising of tight controls through complex procedures at the global and local IT unit level as 'red tape.' The global unit's overemphasis on governance can undermine local unit ownership and accountability and the global reorganization initiative can take on an adversarial relationship.	To obtain buy-in and improve commitment to the reorganization, the global IT unit should encourage autonomy by eliminating unnecessary red tape and collaborating with the local IT unit. For example, local teams should be given the freedom and the resources to execute 'special' projects without requiring global approval. Local unit managers should call for more flexible governance practices and support workers by removing bureaucratic impediments.

promotes mutual respect, and enhances overall effectiveness (Ravishankar, 2015). Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of managing cultural tensions in the context of global-local IT reorganizations, identifying three key areas of tension: workplace flexibility versus standardization, strategic versus compliant positions, and empowerment versus bureaucratic controls. It highlights the contrasting perspectives between global IT units' approaches and local units' cultural norms and preferences, outlining specific recommendations for each tension area to foster a more inclusive and harmonious global IT work environment.

Conclusion

IT is evolving rapidly, and in today's global economy, IT managers and workers increasingly work across diverse cultural contexts. This study highlights the importance of national, organizational and occupational culture and its influence on IT reorganization efforts. The study contributes by (1) demonstrating the relevance of Hofstede's national cultural dimensions and Schein's organizational culture model in navigating cultural tensions during IT reorganizations; (2) confirming the role of cultural dialectical tensions in shaping local autonomy and global control conflicts; (3)

showing that global standardization pressures often attempt to override local cultural preferences, but cultural tensions still persist, in areas such as decision-making autonomy and workplace standardization; (4) emphasizing the critical role of cultural adaptability and intercultural competence in fostering successful IT reorganizations; and (5) recommending that IT leaders in diverse regions adjust their approaches to better manage cultural tensions and enhance organizational integration in global IT environments. The findings of this research should help IT managers and organizations better understand the complexities of cultural tensions during global IT reorganizations. Finally, exploring the role of cultural tensions in shaping innovation and collaboration within global IT teams could provide new insights into fostering more inclusive and culturally cohesive work environments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A Semi-structured interview guide

Work background:

- Can you share your professional journey leading up to your current role at LTF?
- What are your primary responsibilities and daily tasks at LTF?
- At what level do you currently operate within LTF's organizational structure?

Reorganization experience:

- Could you provide an overview of the reorganization process at LTF?

- How is the reorganization being implemented, and what stage is it currently at within LTF?
- In what ways are business and IT leadership facilitating this reorganization?
- What modifications have been introduced in the IT infrastructure to accommodate the reorganization?
- What adjustments have been made in the business operations to align with the reorganization goals?
- What have been the primary challenges encountered during the reorganization process?
- Can you describe any tensions you've observed between old and new practices during the reorganization process at LTF?
- What have been the primary opportunities encountered during the reorganization process?

Relationship experiences with the global unit:

- To what extent are representatives from GTF involved in the reorganization projects? Can you provide examples?
- Can you describe any tensions you've observed between LTF and GTF?
- How do you perceive your situation brought about by the reorganization between LTF and GTF?
- How have you managed the challenges associated with the reorganization? Please provide details.
- Overall, how would you describe your relationship with GTF throughout this reorganization? Please provide details.

Outcomes:

- Can you identify any significant moments or turning points where communication played a key role in shaping outcomes?
- Have there been observable changes in performance at the team, IT unit, or organizational level since the reorganization commenced? Please share examples.
- Have the different perspectives within LTF or between LTF and GTF led to innovative solutions or improvements to the success of the reorganization efforts so far?
- Who else within LTF do you think would provide valuable insights into the reorganization process?

Note 1: Questions have been adjusted based on the participant's role during the reorganization within LTF.
Note 2: Some interviews covered fewer questions tailored to the participant's role and available time.
Note 3: Relevant probes were used to further explore responses and gain deeper insights into the reorganization's effects on different aspects of LTF's operations.