

RESPONSE RATES IN INTERNATIONAL MAIL SURVEYS:

RESULTS OF A 22-COUNTRY STUDY

Anne-Wil Harzing

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Dr. Anne-Wil Harzing
University of Melbourne
Department of Management
Faculty of Economics & Commerce
Parkville Campus
Melbourne, VIC 3010
Australia

Email: anne-wil@harzing.com
Web: www.harzing.com

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ABSTRACT

Researchers embarking on their first international mail survey find very little guidance in the present academic literature. In 1988, two articles were published in the fall number of JIBS that claimed that: "at the moment the cross-national researcher has very little evidence upon which to base his judgments about [mail] survey design" (Jobber and Saunders, 1988:488) and "Literature concerned with response rates from industrial samples drawn from multiple countries is nearly absent" (Dawson and Dickinson, 1988:492). Unfortunately, not much has changed since. Still, very little is known about how respondents from different countries react to mail surveys. This article intends to fill part of this gap by describing the results of a large scale international mail survey in 22 countries. Response rates are shown to vary considerably across countries in a way that contradicts much of the earlier (American) research on this subject. Several explanations for these differences in response rates are put forward.

KEY WORDS

International Business Research, Multinationals, International Mail Surveys, Response Rates.

INTRODUCTION

The belief in the universality of management or organizational science has often been discarded as a myth (Adler, 1983; Hofstede, 1980a/b; Laurent, 1983; Osigweh, 1989; Ronen, 1986). Even so, very little research focuses on cross-cultural or international issues. Adler (1983) found that only 4.2% of the organizational behavior articles published in American management journals focused on cross-cultural or international issues. Of these publications, nearly half focused on one single country. Two studies that replicated Adler's findings could not find a significant increase in the number of cross-cultural articles (Godkin, Braye and Cauch, 1989; Peng, Peterson and Shyi, 1990). In a more recent article Adler and Bartholomew (1992) were somewhat more optimistic and indicated that at least culture's impact on managerial behavior has become well recognized.

Even so, to date there is very little empirical backing for cross-cultural theories and models. And although Yeung (1995) puts forward a very convincing case for qualitative personal interviews in international business research, mail surveys often remain the only feasible data collection tool for research in more than one or two countries. Surprisingly, very few articles have been written that could give the international researcher any practical guidance in this respect. Various, mostly rather recent, articles have been written about methodological problems in international or cross-cultural research (Adler, 1984; Harpaz, 1996; Hines, 1993; Mullen, 1995; Nasif et al. 1991; Riordan, 1994; Rosenzweig, 1994; Samiee and Jeong, 1994; Sekeran, 1983; Singh, 1995). When it comes to the more practical and mundane issues such as the choice of incentives to increase response rates or the response rates to expect from different countries, the international researcher has to rely on a handful of articles that give fragmented information about a very limited number of countries (see the literature review for a discussion of these studies).

The paucity of articles on international mail surveys is all the more surprising, since there is a simply overwhelming number of publications available on the response rate effect of virtually every imaginable aspect of mail surveys in a *domestic* setting: number of questions, questionnaire length, the colour of the questionnaire, user friendly questionnaire formats, ticking versus circling answers, the name of the researcher (native or non-native American), anonymity, deadlines, type of outgoing postage, type of return envelope, pre-contacts, follow-ups, offer of results, personalization, topic interest, auspices of the survey, numerous types of incentives, colour of the signature on a covering letter, response rates of left- or right-handed respondents, use of handwritten postscripts and many, many more. The field has even generated a substantial number of reviews on factors affecting response rates to mail surveys which together cover hundreds and hundreds of articles (see e.g Church, 1993; Fox, Crask and Kim, 1988; Harvey, 1987; Jobber, 1986; LaGarce and Kuhn, 1995; Yu and Cooper, 1983). Further, Diamantopoulos, Sclegelmich and Webb (1991) used these

and other reviews to draw up an exhaustive checklist of potential influences on mail survey response and queried both researchers and respondents about the influence of each factor. They conclude that: "the results of the present study show a high degree of congruence in the perceptions of researchers and respondents with regard to the influences associated with mail-questionnaire response in an industrial setting" (1991:338).

The contrast between the maturity of this field of research in a domestic setting and the virtual absence of articles in an international setting is striking. This article therefore aims to fill part of this gap by describing the results of a large scale international mail survey. Its main purpose is to illustrate differences in response rates between countries and to discuss the possible reasons for these differences. However, in view of the serious lack of information available to researchers on international mail survey design, we will also briefly discuss some of the choices we made in this respect.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

International mail surveys aiming at an industrial population have a history of very low response rates. For regular mail surveys without a telephone follow-up/pre-contact, response rates typically vary between 6% and 16% (Dawson and Dickinson, 1988; Ghoshal and Nohria, 1993; Jobber and Saunders, 1988; Jobber, Mirza and Wee, 1991; Shiphandler, 1994; Wolf, 1994). Although reminders usually increase response rate a recent survey (Kopp, 1994) received only 8.8% response with two mailings.

Many of the firms that declined participation in the study to be described below, indicated that they had a corporate policy not to participate in mail surveys, since the number of questionnaires had simply become overwhelming, especially over the past five years. One American company even had printed standard response cards to deal with this issue! To quote some of the typical answers that were received from headquarters:

"Roughly 100 requests of this kind are received by ... (company name) weekly from all over the world. We had to decide not to answer any anymore in order to set no precedence."

"In recent times the increase in requests to participate in questionnaires and surveys has grown enormously and is now at a level where our staff are no longer able to cope with them without serious interference to their normal work. We have, therefore, been obliged to adopt, reluctantly, the policy of not becoming involved in questionnaires, surveys and returns - whatever their nature or extent - unless they are a statutory requirement."

"We appreciate your interest in ... (company name) and wish it were possible to answer each of your questions for your thesis. Unfortunately, we receive many letters similar to yours, and because of limited time and manpower, it is impossible to respond favourably to every request. To be fair to all, it was decided that none be responded to in order to concentrate our efforts in providing our customers with quality products and service."

or simply:

"Too many, too often"

Low response rates can pose considerable problems for the international researcher. Although non-sampling error might exceed sampling error by several orders of magnitude, disappointing response rates might lead to samples that should be considered too small to draw *any* conclusions from. In some cases this might even necessitate the researcher to collect data using other research methods *after* completing a time and cost-intensive mail survey. However, in an international context there are very few alternatives to mail surveys when companies in more than one or two countries are investigated. Therefore, generating reasonable response rates should be one of the researcher's top priorities. Unfortunately, as indicated in the introduction, very few studies have investigated response rates in international mail surveys. A systematic literature review in international business/management and marketing journals revealed only five studies that focused specifically on response rates and/or incentives in an international context.

Keown (1985) showed that response rates in Japan were nearly two times as high as in Hong Kong for a similar (business) population. In addition, respondents in the two countries differed in their response to incentives. Including a one dollar incentive doubled the response rate in Japan, but resulted in a zero response rate in Hong Kong. Ayal and Hornik (1986) found foreign surveys to generate higher responses than domestic surveys. However, this result was only significant for the consumer sample and not for the sample of managers. Although, as expected by the authors, the response rate in the US was higher than in Israel, this result was again only significant in the consumer sample. For a sample of business people in Great Britain

and the USA, Jobber and Saunders (1988) found the opposite result: domestic surveys generated higher response rates than foreign surveys. Contrary to the authors' expectations, no significant differences were found in response rates between the two countries. Dawson and Dickinson (1988) showed that a commemorative stamp significantly increased response rates in both the UK and Germany. Without the stamp incentive, response rates in Canada and the US were higher than in the UK and Germany. With the stamp incentive, response rates were highest in Japan. Jobber, Mirza, and Wee, (1991) tested the effect of both enclosed (a bookmark) and promised (offer of results) incentives. Conforming to the literature on domestic mail surveys, enclosed incentives were more effective in increasing response rates than promised incentives. Response rates did not differ significantly between the three receiving countries: Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. As expected, differences in response rates were apparent between subsidiaries from American and Japanese MNCs. The former had more than double the response rates of the latter. The authors attribute this to differences in English language fluency. The study's questionnaire was in English and the authors noted that most subsidiaries of Japanese MNCs had Japanese managing directors.

Since so few articles have been written that systematically compare response rates between countries, we decided to search the last six volumes (1991-1996, including the numbers of 1997 that were available) of the *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Management International Review* and *International Business Review* for articles that mentioned differences in response rates, even though their main focus was on other issues. Three special issues of MIR were excluded as they contained reprints of older articles. Since *International Business Review* started as *Scandinavian International Business Review* in 1992, only five volumes were included. Table 1 summarises the results of this search. The first column mentions the journal, the second column mentions the total number of articles published in the period under investigation, while the third column indicates the number and percentage of articles that report on mail surveys.

Table 1: *International and domestic mail surveys articles in three International Business journals*

| Journals | Total articles | Mail survey articles | US DMS articles | non-US DMS articles | US-IMS articles | non-US IMS articles | IMS articles with response rate differences |
|---|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|---|
| Journal of International Business Studies | 206 | 52 (25%) | 24 (46%) | 8 (15%) | 18 (35%) | 2 (4%) | 10 |
| Management International Review | 165 | 35 (21%) | 15 (43%) | 4 (11%) | 12 (34%) | 4 (11%) | 12 |
| International Business Review | 125 | 21/19* (17%) | 4 (21%) | 6 (32%) | 6 (32%) | 3 (16%) | 5 |
| Total | 496 | 108/106 (22%) | 43 (41%) | 18 (17%) | 36 (34%) | 9 (8%) | 27 |

DMS = Domestic mail survey
IMS = International mail survey

The articles reporting on mail surveys were then subdivided into four groups: articles reporting on mail surveys sent from the US to US respondents (column 4: US domestic mail surveys); articles reporting on domestic mail surveys outside the US (column 5: non-US domestic mail surveys); articles reporting on mail surveys sent from the US to other countries (column 6: US international mail surveys) and articles reporting on mail surveys sent from non-US countries to other countries (column 7: non-US international mail surveys). Only international mail surveys are of interest for our study. Not all international mail survey articles, however, differentiated their response rates across countries or even mentioned response rates at all. Therefore a final column was included that indicates the number of articles that *do* include data on response rates.

The American dominance in American but also in European international business journals is very obvious. Forty percent of the articles on mail surveys in *international* business journals have a purely *domestic US* orientation (column 4). These surveys are mailed from the US by US researchers to US companies, although sometimes these companies are subsidiaries of foreign multinationals. Further, only 9 of the 45 truly international mail surveys were sent from another country than the US (columns 6 and 7). Of these nine, four were sent from the UK and three from Canada. Of the two European journals, *Management International Review* resembles the *Journal of International Business Studies* closely in American content. *International*

*There were two incidents where the same database was used for different articles. Therefore only one study from each set was included in the analysis.

Business Review started out as a truly European journal with an occasional US article. Since volume 4 (1995), however, the number of American authors has increased considerably.

Of the 45 international mail survey articles that were found in the period under investigation, only 27 identified (differences in) response rates. In none of the articles differences in response rates were explained or even highlighted. Sometimes we had to deduce them ourselves from available sample information. Of these 27 studies, five were conducted in one country only, so that comparisons in response rates across countries are not possible. Of the remaining 22 articles, 13 articles were limited to two countries (usually their domestic country and one foreign country). Five of these articles compared the US and Japan and in four of these cases response rates were considerably higher for Japanese respondents. A comparison between the US and Europe as a whole showed higher response rates for the US and a comparison between the US and the UK reported slightly higher response rates for the US. In all of these seven cases, questionnaires were sent from the US. In a further three of the two-country comparisons questionnaires were sent from Canada. Questionnaires were sent to Canadian, US, UK and Austrian firms. In two of the three cases response rates were highest for Canada. Also, two of the two-country comparisons were sent from the UK to British, Canadian and German firms. In the UK-Canada comparison response rates were very comparable, while in the UK-Germany comparison response rates were higher in the UK. In the final two-country study questionnaires were sent from Finland to Norway and France and response rates were highest in Norway.

A further seven of the 27 studies that identified differences in response rates compared three or four different countries. In all but one of these seven studies, questionnaires were sent from the USA. In most of the studies, response rates in the various countries were very comparable, although in cases where the US was included as a recipient country, its response rates were usually highest, especially when compared with European countries. The remaining two studies focused on nine countries and in both cases questionnaires were sent from the USA. One of these included Latin American recipient countries only. Although there were some differences in the total number of questionnaires received, with Colombia, Ecuador and Peru scoring higher than Argentina and Venezuela, the percentage of completed questionnaires was very similar across countries. The other study comprised four Asian and five Anglo-Saxon recipient countries. Overall, response rates were rather similar, although the Anglo-Saxon countries scored somewhat higher than the Asian countries.

Some general conclusions can be drawn from the articles in the last column of Table 1, the articles discussed before and some selective other, mainly older, articles. In these conclusions, we will focus on the countries that are included in our own survey:

- Response rates in Japan are higher than response rates in the US (Daniel and Reitsperger, 1994; Jain and Tucker, 1995; Kopp, 1988; Kriger and Solomon, 1992; Tung, 1982; Ueno and Sekeran, 1992). Response rates in the US are higher than response rates in Japan (Culpan and Kucekemiroglu, 1993). In all studies questionnaires were sent from the U.S.
- Response rates in the US are higher than response rates in European countries (Banai and Reisel, 1993; Dawson and Dickson, 1988; Cullen, Johnson and Sakano, 1995; Jain and Tucker, 1995; Jobber and Saunders, 1986; Kopp, 1988; Kwok and Arpan, 1994; Morris, Davis and Allen, 1994; Schlegelmich and Robertson, 1995; Tung, 1982). In all studies questionnaires were sent from the U.S.
- Response rates in Japan are higher than response rates in European countries (Dawson and Dickson, 1988, Kopp, 1988; Jain and Tucker, 1995; Tung, 1982). In all studies questionnaires were sent from the U.S.
- Response rates in Norway are higher than response rates in France, when questionnaires are sent from Finland. (Björkman, 1994)
- Response rates in Hong Kong are the lowest response rates achieved in the survey (Cullen et al. 1995, Harrison et al., 1995; Keown, 1985). In all studies questionnaires were sent from the U.S.
- Domestic surveys generate higher responses than foreign surveys (Jobber and Saunders, 1988, Teagarden et al. 1995).

Since very few of these articles tested differences in response rates statistically, we will only formulate hypotheses for differences that are found by two or more authors. The following four hypotheses follow directly from the data discussed above:

Hypothesis 1: International mail survey response rates in Japan will be higher than in the US.

Hypothesis 2: International mail survey response rates in the US will be higher than in Europe.

Hypothesis 3: International mail survey response rates in Japan will be higher than in Europe.

Hypothesis 4: International mail survey response rates in Hong Kong will be the lowest in the study.

Since none of the authors discussed above offers any explanations for differences in response rates, these hypotheses are based on the simple results of previous studies, rather than on specific theoretical motivations. However, as an explanation of expected higher response rates for the US, Ayal and Hornik (1984), endorsed by Jobber and Saunders (1988), put forward the reasoning that Americans are more familiar with multiple-choice questionnaire instruments and are more likely to undertake small voluntary civic tasks such as co-operating in a mail survey. A partial explanation for low response rates in Hong Kong is offered by Yeung (1995) who indicates that "as a result of extremely high rental rates and volatility in business, companies in Hong Kong change their office locations and hence addresses often. Mailing addresses in directories will therefore become outdated very rapidly." (1995:328). Further, companies encounter a frequent change in top executives, because of a high personnel turnover rate and a tight labour market. This might mean that many questionnaires do not reach their destination and that the actual number of undeliverable questionnaires might be much higher than the returns by postal services. Domestic response rates seem relatively low in Hong Kong as well. Two academicians of the Chinese University of Hong Kong indicated that for domestic surveys to managers a response rate of around 15% could be expected and that telephone reminders are usually necessary to achieve this. In addition, several researchers with experience in Hong Kong pointed out that the pace of business life in Hong Kong is so frantic that managers barely have the time to do their normal work, let alone respond to questionnaires.

A final conclusion indicated that response rates for domestic surveys are higher than for foreign surveys. In Teagarden et al. (1995) this effect is particularly strong. The authors describe a large scale international research project in which researchers from various countries collaborated. In Mexico response rates were around 4% for a random sample, but they were able to increase the response rate to 90% by masking the US origin and changing the sampling technique. In Great Britain, the project had almost no success prior to masking. This source effect can only be truly tested with a design where questionnaires to the recipient are sent from *both* the domestic country and the foreign country as was done by Teagarden et al. (1995) and Jobber and Saunders (1988). Relatedly, however, we find that in most of the studies discussed above where questionnaires were sent from one particular country to both domestic and foreign firms, responses for foreign firms were lower.* A tentative conclusion might therefore be that questionnaire recipients are more likely to respond when the sender is not too distant from them, either in a geographical or in a cultural sense. The study by Björkman (1994), where questionnaires were sent from Finland to Norway and France, supports this idea in a comparison that does *not* include the domestic country. We will therefore formulate the following two additional hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: The response rate in an international mail survey will be negatively related to the geographical distance between the sending and receiving country.

Hypothesis 6: The response rate in an international mail survey will be negatively related to the cultural distance between the sending and receiving country.

MAIL SURVEY DESIGN AND SAMPLE

In this section we discuss the sample that will be used to test the hypotheses developed above. Since, as indicated above, very little information about the design of international mail surveys is available to the researcher venturing on the international path, we will also describe some of our design choices here. This article, however, will only contain a short description of the choices made, more detailed information can be found in Harzing (1996).

* A notable exception to this are response rates for Japan, which are usually higher than those for the domestic country.

This mail survey was conducted as part of the author's doctoral research, which focused on control mechanisms in multinational companies. The empirical part involved mailing questionnaires to CEOs and Human Resource Managers at the headquarters of 122 multinationals and to the managing directors of some 1650 subsidiaries of these multinationals in 22 different countries. Questionnaires were mailed from Maastricht University, the Netherlands. A pilot mailing was sent to a 96 subsidiaries in 12 different countries at the beginning of June 1995. No announcements postcards were used in this pilot mailing, but two fax reminders were sent, respectively one and two weeks after the original mailing. For the final mailing announcement postcards and questionnaires were sent out in two batches: one in October 1995 and one in January 1996. Reminders to the first batch were sent in January 1996, about three months after the original mailing. Reminders to the second batch were sent in March 1996, about six weeks after the original mailing.

The mailing process started with the *collection of addresses*. Since the questionnaire was to be sent to 22 different countries, we could not simply copy addresses from the first available address book with for instance foreign owned subsidiaries in the US. Since we wanted to be able to analyse data at the level of the individual MNC as well, our starting point was an address book that included the names and addresses of the 500 largest multinational companies and their subsidiaries in some 80 countries (Hoopes, 1994). These addresses were subsequently checked and supplemented using country based address books. All in all this process involved about two months of full-time work. In total, nearly 40 different books* were used. Only when most of the addresses had been collected and checked, we requested and received annual reports for all of the 122 headquarters included in our sample. These annual reports were mainly requested to get financial and historical information about the company. In addition to this, however, many annual reports turned out to contain a complete directory with name and address information for the companies (major) subsidiaries. Annual reports might therefore be an excellent starting point to collect addresses, especially since they are likely to be more up to date than address books. Even though the most recent address books were used, addresses were at least a year old before the questionnaires were actually send out and 12.5% of the questionnaires came back undeliverable. This is by no means abnormal in international mail surveys. Shipchandler (1994) had 26.1% returns, while Schlegelmich and Robertson (1995) indicate that about 20% of the entries in printed directories become invalid each year. Casson et al. (1996) found nearly 21% of the addresses of the Fortune 500 list they used in their study to be inaccurate or out of date. Further, one should not forget that actual postal returns are a conservative estimate of undeliverables. The fact that 25% of the undeliverables did not became apparent before the reminder, already indicates that postal services are not always reliable.

The *questionnaire* itself was carefully designed to be easy to complete. There were only six open ended questions that asked for factual data (year of foundation, number of employees). All the other questions used tick-boxes. The total number of questions was 56 spread over 8 pages. Though results on the effect of coloured questionnaires on response rates are inconsistent (Greer and Lohtia, 1994; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963, Jobber and Sanderson, 1983; Matteson, 1974; Pressley and Tullar, 1977; Pucel, Nelson and Wheeler, 1971), the questionnaire was printed on a pale yellow paper for greater recognition. At the back of the last page of the questionnaire, the return address (an international business reply number) was printed in such a way that respondents could return the questionnaire by folding it in three and taping/stapling it. No postage nor envelope was needed. A *response card*, including the respondent's name and address, was included with the questionnaire. Respondents could use this response card to indicate that they did not want to participate in the survey (about 10% used this opportunity) or to indicate that they had sent back the questionnaire anonymously by separate post. As response rates usually increase with pre-contacts (see e.g Church, 1993; Dillman, 1978; Fox, Crask and Kim, 1988; Harvey, 1987; Jobber, 1986; LaGarce and Kuhn, 1995; Yu and Cooper, 1983)* respondents received an *announcement postcard* - that shortly explained the nature of the study and indicated four typical questions to which the survey might give an answer - about a week before the questionnaire was due to arrive. The choice of the language of the questionnaires and postcards - English - was motivated by both budget constraints (some 15 different languages were included in the survey)

* e.g. the Kompass and Dun & Bradstreet address books for each country for which they were available, Graham and Trotman's Major companies of Europe and Far East and Australasia and many country-specific address books e.g. Handbuch der Grossunternehmen and Handbuch der Mittelständische Unternehmen for Germany.

* Interestingly, the only study that found a decrease of response rates when prenotification was used, was conducted outside the USA (UK, (Jobber and Sanderson, 1983)). Again there might be a difference in the usefulness of this tactic across countries.

and a number of substantive reasons. The latter included the assumption that managing directors in multinational firms would at least have a passive knowledge of English and the fact that we could not determine the actual language spoken by the respondent with any certainty.

Although the results on this particular aspect of mail survey design are not completely consistent, *personalisation* is usually thought to increase response rates (see e.g Church, 1993; Dillman, 1978; Fox, Crask and Kim, 1988; Harvey, 1987; Jobber, 1986; LaGarce and Kuhn, 1995; Yu and Cooper, 1983). Letters were therefore mail-merged to prepare personalised addresses and salutations. A hand-written signature was included. To increase the feeling of being addressed personally, both the announcement postcard and the questionnaire included a scanned photograph of the author before a wall of relevant international books. Further, it was hypothesised that addressees would be more likely to respond if a local university had endorsed the project. Academics at local universities in the 22 countries were therefore contacted with the request to act as a member of an international committee of recommendation. A description of the research project was included in each case. Fortunately, none of them refused, although no representative could be found for Venezuela and Mexico. The names of these people were included on both the announcement postcard and the questionnaire under the heading: "Committee of recommendation." In addition to increasing the "local content" of the survey, this committee was hypothesised to increase the sense of importance of the project.

Incentives are usually shown to increase response rates (see e.g Church, 1993; Fox, Crask and Kim, 1988; Harvey, 1987; Jobber, 1986; LaGarce and Kuhn, 1995; Yu and Cooper, 1983). After considering a number of options, varying from money and electronic organisers to flower seeds, a small non-monetary incentive was included: a bag of Pickwick tea for one. This tea-bag was attached to the cover letter next to a PS: "Why don't you take a short break, have a nice cup of tea and fill out the questionnaire right now, it will only take 10-15 minutes". This incentive was hypothesised to catch the addressee's attention, prevent the questionnaire from being thrown away immediately, bring the respondent in a pleasant mood and emphasise that it would not take too much time to fill out the questionnaire (just the time to drink a cup of tea). In the reminder, we elaborated on this theme by including instant coffee for the addressees that did not like tea.

Table 2 summarises the number of respondents by industry, subsidiary country and country of headquarters' location. As we will see below, differences in the number of respondents by country are partly due to differences in response rates. They are also reflective, however, of differences in the number of questionnaires that were sent out to the various countries and industries. Differences in response rates between *countries* are the focus of this article. However, if responding firms are shown to differ significantly from non-responding firms on other characteristics as well, this might seriously handicap the testing of our hypotheses. Therefore responding and non-responding firms were compared on the size (number of employees) and year of foundation of both headquarters and subsidiaries. Although responding subsidiaries were on average smaller than non-responding subsidiaries, none of the four comparisons was significant. We will therefore proceed with the testing of our hypotheses in the next section.

* The final committee consisted of the following members (in alphabetical order). Prof. dr. John Dunning, Rutgers University, USA; Prof. dr. Paul Evans, INSEAD, France; Dr. Anthony Ferner, University of Warwick, United Kingdom; Dr. Carlos Garcia Pont, IESE, Spain; Prof. dr. Gunnar Hedlund, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden; Prof. dr. Martin Hilb, Hochschule St. Gallen, Switzerland; Prof. dr. Geert Hofstede, IRIC, The Netherlands; Dr. Jorma Larimo, University of Vaasa, Finland; Prof. dr. Christian Maroy, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium; Dr. Aahad Osman-Gani, Nanyang Business School, Singapore; Prof. dr. Jaap Pauwe, Erasmus University, The Netherlands; Prof. dr. Victor Prochnik, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Prof. dr. Gordon Redding, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong; Prof. dr. Marino Regini, IRES Lombardia, Italy; Dr. Oscar Risso Patrón, Universidad Argentina John F. Kennedy, Argentina; Prof. dr. Arndt Sorge, Humboldt Universität, Germany; Prof. dr. Bill Roche, University College Dublin, Ireland; Prof. dr. Danny Van Den Bulcke, Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium; Prof. dr. Yoko Sano, Keio University, Japan; Prof. dr. Udo Wagner, Universität Wien, Austria; Dr. Steen Scheuer, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark; Dr. Denice Welch, Norwegian School of Management, Norway.

Table 2: *Number of respondents by industry, subsidiary country and country of headquarters' location*

| Industry | Number of respondents | Subsidiary country | Number of respondents |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Argentina | 4 |
| Electronics, electr. Equipment | 41 | Austria | 8 |
| Computers, office equipment | 26 | Belgium | 14 |
| Motor vehicles and parts | 30 | Brazil | 15 |
| Petroleum (products) | 20 | Denmark | 16 |
| Food & Beverages | 34 | Finland | 8 |
| Pharmaceutical | 46 | France | 14 |
| Paper (products) | 25 | Germany | 16 |
| Chemical (products) | 55 | Hong Kong | 5 |
| Various | 10 | Ireland | 11 |
| | | Italy | 21 |
| Country of location of headquarters | Number of respondents | Japan | 16 |
| | | Mexico | 10 |
| | | Netherlands | 25 |
| Finland | 23 | Norway | 13 |
| France | 26 | Singapore | 10 |
| Germany | 32 | Spain | 14 |
| Japan | 38 | Sweden | 11 |
| Netherlands | 16 | Switzerland | 14 |
| Sweden | 41 | UK | 25 |
| Switzerland | 31 | US | 13 |
| UK | 25 | Venezuela | 4 |
| US | 55 | | |

SURVEY RESULTS

TESTING OF HYPOTHESES

The first four hypotheses that were put forward were concerned with differences between specific countries or groups of countries. Table 3 summarises the results of the tests of these four hypotheses. Hypothesis one and four can be accepted: response rates are higher in Japan than in the US and the lowest response rates are found in Hong Kong. With regard to hypothesis 3 the result is in the expected direction, but is not significant. Interestingly, not only is hypothesis 2 rejected, but also could its opposite hypothesis be accepted at a 0.007 significance level. Response rates in Europe are actually twice as high as in the United States.

Table 3: *Hypotheses on differences in response rates*

| Hypothesis | Response Rates | Z | P-values (2-tailed) | Result |
|-------------------------|---|--------|---------------------|---|
| 1. RR Japan > RR US | Japan 28.6%, US: 11.4% | -2.789 | 0.005 | Accepted |
| 2. RR US > RR Europe | US 11.4%, Europe 22.9% | -2.685 | 0.007 | Rejected, opposite hypothesis accepted |
| 3. RR Japan > RR Europe | Japan 28.6%, Europe 22.9% | -1.095 | 0.274 | Rejected, result is in expected direction |
| 4. Hong Kong lowest RR | 7.1% = lowest response rate in the total survey | | | Accepted |

Hypotheses 5 and 6 focused not so much on specific countries, but rather on the distance between sending and receiving country in both a geographical and a cultural sense.* Geographical distance was simply measured as the distance in kilometres between the respective countries' capitals. Cultural distance was measured with Hofstede's (1980b, 1991) cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity and individualism/collectivism. Hofstede's fifth dimensions, Confucian dynamism, was not included since data for this dimension were not available for most of the countries in our study. Although Hofstede's work has been the subject of considerable criticism (see Harzing & Hofstede, 1996 for a summary), it has

* Although cultural and geographical distance are clearly related, they are not synonymous. Some countries are culturally rather similar to the Netherlands (e.g. the USA), while they are located at a large geographical distance. Others (e.g. Belgium and Austria) are geographically close, but culturally distant.

gradually become a classic and part of “normal science” (Kuhn, 1970). Successive Social Science Citation Indexes list a total of more than 1000 citations of it from 1981 through 1996. Replications (see e.g. Hoppe, 1990; Lowe, 1996b; Punnett & Withane, 1990; Søndergaard, 1994) have largely found the same differences as the IBM-study did. Further, the cultural clusters found by Hofstede conform to the clusters found in many other studies (see Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). A considerable advantage of Hofstede’s study is the large number of countries included (all of our headquarters and subsidiary countries were part of Hofstede’s study) and the convenient quantification of the various cultural dimensions. Several alternative approaches (Laurent, 1983; Triandis, 1983; Trompenaars, 1993) loose out on either the number of countries included or the lack of any empirical verification. The cultural distance between the Netherlands and each individual subsidiary country was calculated using an adjusted version of the Kogut & Singh (1988) formula:

$$CD_s = \sum_{i=1}^4 \left\{ (I_{is} - I_{in})^2 / V_i \right\} / 4$$

where I_{is} stands for the score for the i th cultural dimension of the subsidiary country in question, I_{in} stands for the score for the i th cultural dimension of the Netherlands, V_i is the variance of the index of the i th cultural dimension, and CD_s is the cultural difference of the subsidiary country from the Netherlands.

Not all of the respondents in our sample had the nationality of the country in which they were located, since about 40% of them were expatriates. As the geographical and cultural distance between the home country of the expatriate and the Netherlands might be more important for his feeling of proximity to the Netherlands, than the country in which he happens to be located at the time of the survey, we also calculated the cultural and geographical distance between the home country of the respondent and the Netherlands.*

Mann-Whitney tests were used to test for the difference in geographical and cultural distance from the Netherlands between respondents and non-respondents. When looking at the country of location of the respondent, non-respondents were on average more distant both geographically and culturally. However, the results were only marginally significant (Z-value -1.783, $p = 0.075$, 2-tailed for cultural distance and Z-value -1.901, $p = 0.057$, 2-tailed for geographical distance). More significant results were achieved (Z-value -2.693, $p = 0.007$, 2-tailed for cultural distance and Z-value -2.818, $p = 0.005$, 2-tailed for geographical distance) when looking at the home country of the respondent. Overall, respondents were geographically and culturally closer to the Netherlands than non-respondents. We can therefore accept both hypothesis 5 and 6. This result puts the prevailing notion - already contradicted above - that response rates to mail surveys in the US are higher than in Europe in a different light. Lower European response rates in previous, mostly American or Canadian studies, might not be inherent for European countries as such. Rather their geographical and cultural distance from the country from which the questionnaires were sent might have been the cause for lower response rates.

DETAILED RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Although some of the previous findings with regard to response rates could be confirmed, the rejection of hypothesis 3 and acceptance of the opposite of hypothesis 2 would suggest that it is useful to have a closer look at the response rates for the 22 different countries. This is all the more justified since many of the countries in our survey have not been investigated in previous studies. Table 4 indicates the response rates per industry, headquarters country and subsidiary country. Response rates were calculated by dividing the number of positive responses in both the first mailing and the reminder by the total number of deliverable questionnaires. This formula has become customary in international research, because of the high number of undeliverable questionnaires (Dawson and Dickinson, 1988; Jobber and Saunders, 1988; Jobber, Mirza and Wee, 1991; Keown, 1985; Murray, Wildt and Kotabe, 1995; Shipchandler 1994). A Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to see whether response rates differ significantly between industries, headquarters countries and subsidiary countries. Response rates do not differ significantly between industries (Chi Square 6.308, Sig. 0.504). They do differ significantly, however, for both headquarters (Chi Square 25.334, Sig. 0.001) and subsidiary countries (Chi Square 51.545, Sig. 0.000).

* Please note that this would change the data in about forty percent of the cases only, since for host country nationals home country and country of location are synonymous.

Since as discussed above, the nationality of the respondent might be different from the country of location, we also included the response rates by nationality in Table 4. Differences in response rates between nationalities are even slightly larger (Chi Square 53.961, Sig. 0.000) than differences in response rates between subsidiary countries. For the Asian and Latin American countries response rates for locals are clearly (much) lower than response rates for expatriates. Also Austrian nationals display very low response rates. Remarkably, the unexpected high response rate in Italy - the country scores usually very low in mail surveys (see e.g. Brewster et al., 1994; O'Neill et al., 1995; Talaga and Buch, 1992) and Italians are not renowned for their dutiful response to written requests - was indeed due to Italians and not to expatriates located in Italy.

Table 4: Response rates for different industries and (headquarters and subsidiary) countries

| Industry | Response rate | Subsidiary country | Response rate | Response rate nationality |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| | | Hong Kong | 7.1% | 0% |
| Computers | 16.2% | US | 11.4% | 11.6% |
| Electronics | 17.1% | Argentina | 12.9% | 9.1% |
| Food & Beverages | 18.4% | France | 13.6% | 12.5% |
| Motor vehicles & parts | 20.4% | Singapore | 13.6% | 4.8% |
| Paper (products) | 20.6% | Venezuela | 13.8% | 0% |
| Chemical (products) | 21.3% | Mexico | 15.2% | 6.5% |
| Petroleum (products) | 21.4% | Germany | 15.5% | 13.4% |
| Pharmaceutical | 23.8% | Spain | 15.9% | 18.4% |
| | | UK | 18.8% | 22.3% |
| Country of location of headquarters | Response rate | Austria | 19.0% | 10.0% |
| | | Belgium | 20.3% | 20.4% |
| | | Sweden | 20.4% | 19.6% |
| US | 14.3% | Brazil | 22.1% | 14.3% |
| Japan | 16.7% | Italy | 24.4% | 25.8% |
| France | 18.6% | Netherlands | 26.6% | 27.4% |
| UK | 19.7% | Japan | 28.6% | 16.8% |
| Germany | 21.8% | Switzerland | 29.8% | 27.6% |
| Finland | 24.0% | Ireland | 30.6% | 32.4% |
| Sweden | 24.6% | Finland | 32.0% | 28.0% |
| Switzerland | 30.4% | Norway | 40.6% | 38.7% |
| Netherlands | 31.5% | Denmark | 42.1% | 40.6% |

Most studies referred to in the literature review section on hypothesis building cannot be used to compare the detailed results of this survey with, since they usually describe a mailing to the US and one or two other countries, one of which is often Japan. Most of these studies show that responses in Japan are higher than in the US, while US response rates are higher than those in other countries. The difference in response rates between and the US and Japan has already been tested and confirmed. Since all other countries except for Hong Kong have a higher response rate than the US, these studies all contradict the results of our study.

There is one study that has not been discussed yet, the Price Waterhouse Cranfield study (Brewster et al., 1994), because it is not a truly international mail survey, but rather a collection of domestic surveys using the same (translated) questionnaire. The Price Waterhouse Cranfield studies have so far been conducted in 14 (European) countries, 12 of which are included in our survey as well. The overall response rate (18.4%, usable responses 16.8%) is comparable to our study (usable responses 20.0%). As this is the only study that compares response rates in more than 2 or 3 European countries and in which surveys were not sent from the USA, it forms an excellent base for comparison. Table 5 compares the response rates of our study and the PWC study.

Table 5: Comparison of response rates of our study with response rates of PWC study.

| Country | Response rates our survey | Response rates PWC [*] |
|-------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Overall | 20.0% | 18.5% |
| France | 13.6% | 13% |
| Germany | 15.5% | 14% |
| Spain | 15.9% | 14% |
| UK | 18.8% | 22% |
| Sweden | 20.4% | 40% |
| Italy | 24.4% | 10% |
| Netherlands | 26.6% | 15% |
| Switzerland | 29.8% | 16% |
| Ireland | 30.6% | 12% |
| Finland | 32.0% | 46% |
| Norway | 40.6% | 29% |
| Denmark | 42.1% | 23% |

In both surveys Scandinavian countries have the highest response rates, although in the Cranfield studies top scorers are Sweden and Finland, while in our study this position is taken by Norway and Denmark. On average, however, the response rates for the Scandinavian countries are extremely comparable (33.8% for our survey, 34.5% for the Cranfield survey). For four large European countries (Germany, France, UK and Spain) response rates in both surveys are also very comparable. Major differences occur for Switzerland, The Netherlands, Ireland and Italy. In all cases response rates for our survey are (much) higher. The domestic appeal could explain higher response rates for our study in the Netherlands. A possible, but tentative, conclusion could be that for the other three countries questionnaires sent from the Netherlands, combined with an endorsement of a local university, generate a more positive image than a domestic survey supervised by a UK institution. Especially Ireland might not react so favourably to a UK supervised survey. The fact, that there seem to be some broad similarities in the results of our study and the PWC study led us to search for additional factors that might explain differences in response rates between countries.

ADDITIONAL EXPLANATORY FACTORS

Above, we already indicated that the cultural distance between the sending and receiving country in international mail surveys, might explain part of the differences in response rates between countries. The higher the cultural distance, the lower the response rate. In addition to the cultural distance, the culture of the receiving country or nationality might have an influence itself. Specifically, the questions of our study regarding control mechanisms might be more sensitive in high power distance cultures and hence recipients in these countries might be more hesitant to respond to the questionnaire. We would therefore expect a difference in the score on Hofstede's PDI index between respondents and non-respondents. A Mann-Whitney test showed that this was indeed the case. The average score on the PDI index was lower for respondents than for non-respondents. This was true for both the country of location of the respondent (Z-value -3.556, $p = 0.000$) and the nationality of the respondent (Z-value: -4.052, $p = 0.000$).

The language of the questionnaire might also have had an influence on the response rates in different countries. As explained above, we would expect managing directors of subsidiaries in MNCs to have at least a working knowledge of English. However, the fact that the questionnaire was in English might have been the last drop to decide not to participate in the survey for recipients that are not fluent in this language. Two of the nationalities that had very low response rates, Americans and Singaporeans, have English as their native/official language. However, many other "low response nationals", such as Argentineans, Austrians, Brazilians, French, Mexicans and Venezuelans can be expected to have a more limited English language capacity than the "high response nationals" Danes, Dutch, Fins, Norwegians and Swedes.

The fact that the small group of third country nationals, who can be considered to be truly international managers, had higher response rates than both parent country nationals and host country nationals led us to suspect that the international orientation of the respondent might be an important factor in the decision to respond to an international mail survey. Unfortunately, we did not include measures of this international orientation in our survey. What we can do, however, is look at the international orientation of the country

^{*} The Cranfield response rates for the individual countries had to be estimated from a figure (Brewster & Hegewish, 1994:238) and for some countries had to be averaged over several years. They might therefore not be completely exact.

from which the respondent originates. This international orientation was measured as the volume of exports divided by the gross national product of the country. This was indeed significantly different for respondents and non-respondents (Z-value: -4.074, $p = 0.000$). Also the percentage of foreign sales as part of the total sales for the MNC as a whole, was significantly different between respondents and non-respondent (Z-value -3.296, $p = 0.001$).

Ayal and Hornik (1984) indicated that the higher incidence of mail surveys in the US might lead to a greater familiarity with questionnaires and therefore higher response rates. In our opinion, the opposite effect might actually be more important: because of the fact that American managers receive so many questionnaires, they will be less likely to respond to the umpteenth questionnaire than managers in countries that do not yet receive so many questionnaires. Countries with a low incidence of mail surveys are countries in which field studies, case studies and interviewing are used to a higher extent than survey research (Europe in general, see Collin et al. 1996) and countries that are relatively small and therefore considered unimportant by researchers. It is notable that the five countries with the highest response rates have an average population of only about five million inhabitants.

Although the explanations given above provide a reasonable fit for most countries, there are two countries that give puzzling results: Italy and Japan. Both countries are culturally (and geographically) rather distant from the Netherlands, they score high on the power distance index, its inhabitants are not well-known for their English language fluency, they are not very internationally oriented and, after the US, Japan might very well be the country with the highest incidence of mail surveys given the popularity of this country among American researchers. With regard to Italy, our results contradict previous studies that invariably show very low response rates for Italy. A speculative explanation might be that Italians are perhaps more sensitive than other nationalities to the status-effect of an international committee of recommendation or to the personal appeal of the study.

The consistent high response rate for Japan, regardless of whether the questionnaires are sent from the US or from the Netherlands, is remarkable. In this study, it was shown that this high response rate was caused to a large extent by responding expatriate managers. The response rate for native Japanese was somewhat below average. As previous studies did not mention the nationality of the respondents, it is not clear whether the explanation should be sought in country or nationality or perhaps in a combination of both. A researcher from Singapore also suggested that foreign surveys might elicit higher responses from Asian countries than domestic surveys as much competitive intelligence occurs under the guise of academic research. Companies would therefore feel more comfortable responding to questionnaires mailed from overseas institutions. This would not explain however why response rates from Japan are much higher than from Singapore and Hong Kong.

DISCUSSION

What has this article contributed to the knowledge on conducting international mail surveys? First, no definitive conclusions can be drawn with regard to the efforts that were made in the overall survey design to increase response rates. To be able to do this, a fully experimental approach would have been needed in which groups are comparable on each aspect except the particular treatment to increase response rates. What can be compared, however, are the response rates for the pilot mailing and the final mailing. In the pilot mailing, half of the questionnaires included the photograph, but none included the committee of recommendation, the tea/coffee incentive or the postcard announcement. Only twelve countries were included in the pilot mailing. A Mann-Whitney test that compares the response rates for these twelve countries in the pilot and final mailing shows a significant difference in response rates ($Z = -3.229$, sig. = 0.001). Also, the overall response rate of 20% compares very favourably with the response rates of the other international mail survey studies discussed in this article. Even the Price Waterhouse Cranfield study that worked with a large research team of local universities and used translated questionnaires, had a slightly lower response rate than our study. We can therefore have some confidence that the efforts to increase response rates in the final mailing have indeed been effective.

Second, our study showed that response rates to international mail surveys can differ dramatically between countries and/or nationalities. Several explanatory factors for these differences in response rates were offered. Response rates can be expected to be higher when the geographical and cultural distance between the sender and recipient is smaller, when the country of location/origin of the recipient scores lower on

Hofstede's power distance index and is more internationally oriented, when the recipient can be expected to have a higher English language capacity* and when the recipient receives a relatively small number of questionnaires. To further assess the validity of these explanations, however, much more mail survey research originating from other countries than the US is necessary. Since up till now the overwhelming majority of mail surveys have been sent from the US, the false impression has been created that European inhabitants are less likely to participate in surveys.

Two Asian countries, Hong Kong and Japan, deserve special attention. In view of the results of both this and previous studies, it would seem a waste of time and money to send questionnaires to Hong Kong. This observation is fully confirmed by the detailed account given by Yeung (1995) in a previous issue of this journal, about his reasons for preferring interviews over postal surveys in Hong Kong. Although the business environment in Hong Kong might become even more fascinating in the years to come, personal interviews would seem the only way to acquire information from Hong Kongese respondents. Japan, on the other hand, would seem a "must" for international researchers. With regard to multinational activity, the country is extremely important. In the new combined service/manufacturing Fortune Global 500, there are as many Japanese as American companies, and the Japanese have the largest number of companies in the top 10. Further, in almost all aspects in the field of international business/management Japanese MNCs show patterns that are very different from those in other countries. And finally, one of the very few conclusions that can be drawn unambiguously with regard to response rates in international mail surveys is that in Japan they are higher than average.

As the example of Italy shows, different countries might respond differently to incentives. As also suggest by Jobber, Mirza and Wee (1991), it might therefore be wise to send a pilot mailing to a subsample of companies for each country to ascertain approximate response rates and then differentiate efforts to increase response rates. Of course the feasibility of this option declines when the number of countries included in the survey increases. When more than two or three countries are included, a pilot test would have to be so large to get any useful information, that the number of questionnaires necessary might approximate the number envisaged of the final mailing.

CONCLUSION

Although methodological issues in international research such as calibration, translation and metric equivalence (Mullen, 1995) are very important, disregarding some of the more mundane aspects of an international mail survey can quickly turn the whole project into a failure. Therefore, we plead not only for a careful attention to these aspects, but also for a more consistent inclusion of these aspects in journal articles. Specifically, we would like to urge mail survey researchers to mention at least the country from which the questionnaires were sent and if possible to differentiate response rates between countries.

The results of the survey described in this article show that a committee of recommendation, a personal approach and small non-monetary incentives might help to increase response rates. With regard to differences in response rates between countries/nationalities, this study gives a first indication of what the international researcher might expect. Generating a reasonable response rate might be helped by choosing countries strategically. In doing so, the country from which the questionnaires are sent should be taken into account. We hope that US readers will read this article as a warning that - in addition to many other results from US research - response rates in US mail surveys cannot be generalised to other countries and that non-US readers will interpret this article as an incitement for more non-US international business research.

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* Of course this relationship would only be relevant if the questionnaire is in English.

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