

# Geert Hofstede

## An interview with a pioneer in cross-cultural studies



Over the centuries, the Netherlands has made its mark on history by learning to survive in their own way. Too small to be a world power, with an absence of most natural resources, the Dutch channelled their energies into international trade and industry.

Their historic encounter with Calvinist thought provided the roots for a strong work ethic and a down-to-earth view of life. The result has been tolerance, modesty and (even when faced with *human* problems) great faith in the scientific method.

Add an excellent educational system which emphasizes foreign-language training and you get a dynamic country whose people are both curious by nature and inherently open to other cultures. It's no accident that the father of modern cross-cultural research is Dutch.

Thirty years ago, Geert Hofstede's work *Culture's Consequences* revolutionized the way we look at society. Through theoretical reasoning and statistical analysis, he identified four dimensions in differentiating cultures: high and low power-distance, individualism versus collectivism, strong and weak uncertainty-avoidance and masculinity versus femininity. (He later added a fifth, long- and short-term orientation.)

No one before had empirically measured value differences among cultures and — like most people who force us to

change our way of thinking — he had to battle nay-sayers. But his findings clearly showed how national and regional groupings affect the behavior of organizations, and that this is persistent across time.

Because his initial work was too scientific for most people, Hofstede published a more accessible version in 1991. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* was an instant bestseller and has so far appeared in 18 languages. His “national dimensions” have become an integral part of most intercultural programs and textbooks; his books and articles, required reading for almost any MBA or PhD program.

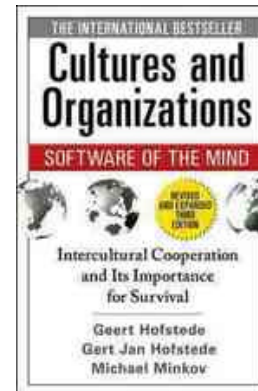
Born in 1928 in Haarlem, Geert Hofstede completed a master's degree in Mechanical Engineering at Delft Technical University in 1953 and a Social Science doctorate at the University of Groningen in 1967. After founding and managing the Personnel Research Department at IBM-Europe from 1965 to 1971, he taught at IMD in Lausanne and at INSEAD at Fontainebleau, and did research at EIASM, Brussels and IIASA, Laxenburg near Vienna. In 1980 he founded his own research institute IRIC, which existed until 2004. In 1985 he joined Maastricht University as a Professor of Organizational Anthropology and International Management. He was made a Honorary Member of SIETAR Europe in 1993. He received honorary doctorates from universities in seven European countries. In the USA

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## A pioneer — continued

*Geert Hofstede's book for laymen "Cultures and Organizations" popularized his work on national cultural differences.*



he was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Management; a May 2008 *Wall Street Journal* ranking placed him among “the twenty most influential management thinkers”. In 2006, Maastricht University inaugurated a *Geert Hofstede Chair* in cultural diversity; in 2009, six European colleges named their transnational Joint Master Program in International Communication the Geert Hofstede Consortium .

I had the opportunity to meet him at his home in Velp and ask about events that helped shape his mind.

### Could you give a brief description of your early life?

When the war ended in Holland in May 1945, I was due to graduate from the Gymnasium while the whole country was in chaos. The schools had been closed in the last year of the war. Despite this, the government decided to give all pupils their diploma. So I found myself, without the last year but with a diploma, entering college quite young--I was still 16.

My father, who was head of technical education in the Netherlands, suggested I should start at a technical college which had recovered from the war faster than the Technical University. I took Mechanical Engineering and spent my entire second year in internships — it was highly practical. I was a factory worker in various places and then I managed to get a three-month position as an assistant ship-engineer sailing from Holland to the Dutch East Indies and back.

After my internships, to avoid being drafted for military service, I didn't finish my last year of technical college but I entered Delft Technical University right away, continuing in mechanical engineering. I spent the next six years there and got involved in many other things beyond engineering.

One was becoming National President of the Liberal Christian Student Association. It was a nice time and allowed me to meet a large variety of people at other universities and widen my horizons and interests. I then became very curious about worker motivation and organization.

### How did all this mix with your engineering studies?

You could say my father had a strong influence in my orientation. Although he was an engineer by training, my father was more gifted in foreign languages. In his high school days, he excelled in them and was only average in sciences. With his technical university degree he had soon become a teacher at a technical college, and he had published a much-used engineering textbook in which every chapter started with a glossary in four languages.

His main interest was not so much in technology, but in the people who do the technology and their motivation. He was known for helping academically weak children of well-to-do families. He would tell parents that their children should first master a trade, such as carpentry, to give them

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## A pioneer — continued



*"In my student days, I was simply fascinated by motivation, the relationship between work and play."*

the experience of success, which would build up their self-confidence so that they could take advanced studies later. Many of these students afterwards thanked him for this.

So you could say my father indirectly opened other worlds than technology. The irony is that I owe my engineer-like mind to my mother, who was the technical person of the family. She was practical and would do the fixing.

It was this sort of intellectual atmosphere that broadened my mind. During my studies, I took an elective for which I had to study a book by a Jesuit, Father Kuylaars on the social role of the enterprise. Its message was that work has a double productivity: externally, to produce things and internally, to develop people. This was years before in the USA Maslow and Herzberg published their theories of self-actualization and motivation versus hygiene.

I found this fascinating and it had a great influence on me. It went along with my interest in the worker-priest (*prêtre-ouvrier*) movement in France, men wanted to experience the everyday life of the working class. All this provided me with the material to do a paper about work and life. By the time I finished, my interests were more in worker motivation. But mechanical engineering had disciplined my mind and that would later be very useful in my work.

### After your studies, did you start as an engineer?

No, first I had to spend two years in the army. I was a technical officer in the arms-purchasing department. We were shooting and testing heavy guns and ammunition. It was adventurous, but I experienced it as a waste of time.

After that, I worked *incognito* as a factory worker for half a year. I did this because I wanted to know how an organization treats you when you are just seen as a worker, not as a student doing an internship. I worked with my hands and it was very, very revealing. Being a factory worker made me see things other industrial psychologists might have missed. My reports and my diary from those days were published much later in a Dutch sociology journal; an English translation has appeared in my 1994 book *Uncommon Sense about Organizations: Cases, Studies, and Field Observations*.

I got my first job as an industrial engineer in the company my father once had started working for. I was sent for a year to a consulting group to be trained in many fields: time-and-motion study, job classification, quality engineering, personnel selection. I became an internal consultant for the company. Later on, I was sent on a ten-week management course, one of the first in the country. We were sixteen young academics from different companies and by the end of the course we knew each other pretty well, including our strengths and weaknesses, our responsibilities and our salaries. It was

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## A pioneer — continued

*Geert Hofstede's PhD thesis "The Game of Budget Control". It's now regarded as a classic in the accounting field*



there that I realized I could do something else, and I left the company pretty soon afterwards.

I was hired as a future plant manager in a hosiery factory. That was a disaster — I ended up getting fired along with another manager — but it was a good experience; I learned a lot about people and Machiavellian power-politics.

My next job was in a textile company that needed to be modernized. They hired a former professor of economics as a financial director, who took me on as his assistant. However I already knew I wanted to do something else, get training in social science. The professor, who was very open, made a deal with me: you help me transform the company for two years and, afterwards, I'll allow you to do a doctorate while working half-time.

The only requirement to do a doctorate in Holland those days was to write the thesis. I didn't have to attend classes but I had to turn myself into a psychologist and that meant reading and studying many, many books.

### So that meant self-teaching?

Yes, you could say I was a self-learner. And there was a lot of pressure because my wife and I had a growing family, I was working half-time and studying. But I managed to do my doctorate in an incredibly short time--two and a half years--and even got a *cum laude*.

### What subject did you write on?

My thesis was "The Game of Budget Control". It was in English, which in Holland was unusual in those days. I chose the theme because during my time with the textile company, we had been setting up a budget system. My focus in that process had been on people's behaviour. For the thesis I did extensive interviewing and some surveying in six other Dutch manufacturing plants. The message in the thesis is that for a budget to be motivating, you should allow a margin of play or game in it. A commercial edition of my thesis was published in the UK and it became quite popular among accountants and led to a new field of study — behavioral accounting. You could say I was more or less the founding father and I even got one of my honorary doctorates for it.

### So, you're also an accountant!

Well, in a way. In fact I gave a speech last year at an international accountants' workshop.

### When you finished your PhD, you joined IBM?

Yes, the textile company wasn't doing too well and IBM offered me a position in their international executive development department; I would also have to coordinate personnel research in the European subsidiaries. As a product of the Dutch school system of the 1940s, I could converse with people in Dutch, English, French, German

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## A pioneer — continued

*When “Culture’s Consequences” was published in 1980, it introduced a new paradigm — dimensions — which since has acquired normal science status.*



and Italian which came very useful. We set up a system of periodic attitude surveys among IBM employees worldwide, and I had to use all my sales skills to convince local general managers to participate.

I worked with bright American and European colleagues who were very willing to share insights and observations. We made a fine team. I had my finest hours at IBM and made many friends in the company. I even received an award for the work I did.

### **How did this work with attitude surveys lead to your breakthrough on cross-cultural dimensions?**

In six years of working with people and with surveys in different places, I had noticed differences between countries but not completely understood the reason for them. The year 1968 brought its student revolts in several European countries and I noticed differences in the IBM subsidiaries in employees' ways of dealing with power and powerlessness. I wanted to analyse more.

IBM generously granted me a two-year sabbatical to teach and do research at IMD (then called IMEDE) in Lausanne. When I was due to return, I proposed to IBM to continue my research into national differences. Unfortunately I had got a new boss, who had no feeling or perspective on what I did, and wanted to assign other priorities. He said

I could give my research material to a university. Being somewhat stubborn, I said I would join that university, and consequently left IBM in 1973, with the permission to carry the survey results with me for further analysis.

I got a part-time teaching job at the INSEAD in Fontainebleau and a research position at EIASM (European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management) in Brussels. This allowed me to continue my research into national differences; the process took six years. I began to intensively read anthropology, international economics, world literature--I'd read anything in order to make sense of the results I had.

I finally published my findings and conclusions in *Culture's Consequences* in 1980. The rest, as you know, is history.

### **One last question: If you were a young researcher today, what intercultural issues would you investigate?**

Follow your own interests and instincts. Talk from the heart. The ones who have the best chance to make a difference are those with something to tell based on their own experiences and relationships.

*Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt*

*More about Geert Hofstede at his website: [www.geerthofstede.nl](http://www.geerthofstede.nl)*

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