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What Is the GMRG and Why Are These People Smiling?

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Our purpose in writing this short article is to (1) provide a few personal insights about an organization that brings together academics from around the world, (2) mention other organizations that have similar missions, and (3) encourage our colleagues (i.e., you) to engage in international activities. Although we will focus on one group of intercontinental collaborators (the Global Manufacturing Research Group), it is our purpose to present it as an example of the kind of organization might become involved.

executive council included additional representatives from Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, and The Netherlands. Since its early beginnings, the GMRG has matured (well, sort of) to become a multinational community of researchers dedicated to the study and improvement of manufacturing practices world-wide.

The original GMRG survey instrument was translated into eight languages and administered in more than 600 companies in a dozen-plus countries. The group selected two industries for its primary focus: machine tools and non-fashion textiles. These industries were chosen because they were likely to be found in nearly every country, regardless of its level of development or natural resources, and because they represent a contrast between a predominantly batch-processing industry and a predominantly process-based industry. The data from the first survey are publicly available on a disk bundled with the book *Global Manufacturing Practices*, edited by Whybark and Vastag and published by Elsevier in 1993.

The GMRG survey was substantially revised in 1993, and several years of data-gathering have ensued. The second round of data gathering produced a sample of more than 1,000 companies in 17 countries. A second revision of the survey is now underway. In the continuing absence of funding, our biggest challenge has been to find a home for collecting, checking, and disseminating the data. Individual data-gatherers have analyzed their own results, but we are currently in the process of aggregating the data at the University of North Carolina. As we've interacted with colleagues who are involved in other international data-gathering efforts, we've learned that getting a "clean," consistent and comparable database is a universal challenge.

The Global Manufacturing Research Group (GMRG)

The GMRG is a loosely knit organization that has been a point of passage or a landing spot for a marvelous group of talented academicians. Membership ranges from 30 to 40 people, with an additional 100 or so individuals on its mailing list. Affiliates reside in some 25 countries.

The organization was conceived in 1985 in Seoul, Korea, after Boo Ho Rho (at Sogang University in Seoul) presented the results of a survey of Korean executives at a Pan Pacific Business Association Conference. Clay Whybark (then at Indiana University) and Boo Ho Rho decided to collaborate on a survey instrument that assessed manufacturing practices. They planned to administer the survey in several countries, and in the first round of data-gathering they reached China, Western Europe, South Korea, and the United States. On the basis of that success, a small nucleus of researchers who were interested in the project assembled in Shanghai, China, in 1990.

The GMRG was born, with charter members hailing from Australia, Bulgaria, Chile, China, England, Hungary, Japan, South Korea, Switzerland, and the United States. Within a short period, the GMRG's



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GMRG Annual Meetings

The GMRG has held eight annual meetings, each hosted by an active member. Small amounts of funding from far-flung CIBERS, host institutions, and other agencies have provided some support, but the organization has no ongoing monetary base. Members draw funding from their individual schools for travel to meetings, or they pay their own way. The GMRG's meeting venue history is as follows:

- 1990 Shanghai, China
- 1991 Budapest, Hungary
- 1992 Puebla, Mexico
- 1993 Melbourne, Australia
- 1994 Seattle, U.S.A.
- 1995 Cranfield, England
- 1996 Wellington, New Zealand
- 1997 Katowice, Poland
- 1998 Hong Kong, China

In addition to these official gatherings, GMRG members have congregated at the biennial DSI international meetings and some of the annual Pan Pacific meetings. We've made attempts (not always successful) to juxtapose our meetings, in time and region, with one of these larger meetings. "Region" has been defined rather broadly. For example, we linked our Mexico meeting with a Pan Pacific meeting in Canada, and our Melbourne meeting was matched with a DSI international meeting in Seoul.

For many of the group's members, GMRG meetings have proven to be an annual highlight. The energy of the interactions among colleagues, and the friendships that have formed, supersede the business side of our gatherings. Thus, although the meetings are productive, the plant tours interesting, and the exposure to new cultures engaging, it is the **people** in the group who bring us all back year after year.

GMRG Outcomes

We admit to having fun, but that's not the only outcome of our affiliation. Here are a few examples of the products and relationships that have grown from the seeds planted in the GMRG:

- Development of a comprehensive survey instrument on manufacturing practices.
- Coordinated international data-gathering efforts.

- Creation of two shared databases.
- Numerous articles published in journals.
- A special issue of the *Journal of Operations Management* and one recently initiated for the *International Journal of Production Economics*.
- Faculty exchanges (e.g., China to Mexico).
- Joint cross-national case writing.
- A collaborative study of the hotel industry in Bulgaria.
- A book edited by Whybark and Vastag, *Global Manufacturing Practices*, published by Elsevier.
- Visiting faculty appointments (e.g., Poland to the U.S.).
- Cooperative arrangements for study tours (e.g., U.S. to Mexico, England to the U.S.).
- Collaboration on additional research projects that reach beyond the GMRG survey.
- Doctoral student exchanges.

Getting Involved Internationally

Perhaps the easiest way to get involved in the international scene is to attend a meeting of one of the professional organizations that draw global participation. Many exist, including, of course, DSI's biennial international meetings and its more recently initiated Asia-Pacific regional meetings. The Pan Pacific Business Association provides another opportunity in the Pacific Rim region, but there are several similar organizations in Europe, as well. For example, the International Society for Inventory Research meets in Budapest, Hungary, and the Working Group on Production Economics meets in Igls, Austria. Both meet biennially in even-numbered years. Each year the European Operations Management Association meets in Europe and the International Society for Production Research holds conferences around the world.

The GMRG is just one example of an organization that conducts international survey research. There are others that provide opportunities for researchers to extend their reach to other countries as well. Among them are the Manufacturing Futures Group at Boston University (Jay Kim), the World Class Manufacturing Project at

the University of Minnesota (Roger Schroeder), the "Made-in" project at the London Business School (Chris Voss), and the quality project at the University of Missouri (Ev Adam). Some of these organizations are open to anyone who wishes to become involved, and others are more selective, requiring an invitation. The GMRG falls somewhere in the middle. Here are a few of our criteria for membership:

- Must be willing to pitch in and work for the good of the order.
- Must know how to have fun (very important).
- Must have something to contribute to the group (we are especially interested in people who have access to data-gathering opportunities in countries outside of the U.S.).
- Must have his/her own funding (we don't have any!).
- Must not have any delusions that membership will lead to fame and fortune. (Gathering and analyzing international data sets is a time-consuming, perilous process.)

Based on our positive experience with the GMRG, we strongly urge all of you to become involved in international organizations for academicians. Regardless of your discipline or area of interest, if you wish to expand your horizons, we encourage you to think big and find ways to expand your network of contacts. Maybe you'll join an existing organization, maybe you'll begin attending DSI International meetings, or maybe you'll start your own group. Whatever you do, have fun!

For more information about the GMRG, contact Professor Clay Whybark at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (phone: 919-962-3206, email: clay_whybark@unc.edu). If you would like to be placed on the mailing list for the GMRG newsletter *The Global Gazette*, contact Jack Wacker (jwacker@iastate.edu, phone: 515-294-8111). ■

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