

# Current Issues of the Development of Employee Intercultural Competency in Work Environment (analysis of the experience of Lithuanian Organizations)

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During the past decade the interest of scientists in multiculturalism has increased significantly, as the need for the development of intercultural competency has become more explicitly manifested in the work environment of organizations. In Lithuania the analysis of intercultural competency is still quite a new research area and is conducted intermittently, i.e. only certain aspects related to intercultural competency are analysed. This article analyses various scientific approaches to the phenomenon of interculturalism and tendencies of its manifestation in the organizational environment. The authors present an empirical research which involved nearly half a thousand respondents (N=464) from the capital public institutions and small municipalities of Lithuania employees who work primarily in the public sector. The survey questionnaire allows to assess skills of intercultural competency, the geography and frequency of intercultural communication, dimensions of competencies of employees in Lithuanian organizations, etc. and to establish the problems characteristic of the competency development. Based on the obtained data the authors of the article establish the problems characteristic of the development of intercultural competence in Lithuanian organizations and provide an overview of future perspectives.

**Keywords:** employees, globalization, interculturalism, intercultural competency.

## 1. Introduction

Current events in Lithuania, such as the launch of the Euro, the increasing rate of international migration (in 2010 more than five thousand immigrants came to Lithuania, meanwhile in 2013 this number grew fourfold and exceeded twenty-two thousand (The Department of Statistics, 2014), the EU sanctions on Russia and the related changes in the priority of business contact directions, in the near future will determine the fact that both leaders of Lithuanian organizations and state politicians will face the necessity to look for new opportunities for cooperation, and thus the challenge to become aware of not so well-known cultures, norms of etiquette, negotiation style, and to find out the expectations of managers and employees.

When one of the priority areas in the organizational strategies is international expansion, whereas the extension of the activity to the international dimension means world competition, there is a need for particular tools to be used to achieve successful competition. For the cultural differences both in the society and in the working environment to be perceived as not impediments, but as advantages and opportunities to use the strengths of each culture, it is very important to develop the society's tolerance and awareness of multiculturalism; meanwhile employees of an organization should be required to develop intercultural competency, which is a complex construct of three dimensions (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and is developed through formal, informal or self-learning or experience. Knowledge of cultural differences, religions, ethical attitudes and values is as important as language proficiency for each employee who has international contact, because it is not easy for people who speak different languages and have different values to find the most efficient way of communication or establish a strong and lasting partnership.

It is probable that in the future the number of monocultural countries will decrease, meanwhile work in a multicultural work environment or with foreign customers will become casual. Zakarevičius (2000) identifies factors that shape national features: lifestyle and production, national mind-set, religion, statehood traditions, personal character traits. National psychological traits of each nation create specific norms of behaviour and communication characteristic of a particular nation. Thus people who come to a foreign country and strive to establish themselves there face the pressure of adopting to the local norms of behaviour, meanwhile the local population view their own culture as superior to the one of newcomers. Such collision of different cultures very often determines various conflict situations, miscommunication and the emergence of stereotypes. Results

of scientific research show that employees are affected more by national culture than their organizational culture (Adler, 2002).

When we touch upon the issues of multiculturalism and interculturalism, we should mention the pioneer of this topic, who analysed cultural dimensions in organizations, i.e. Hofstede (1980); according to him understanding of people means understanding their origin, which helps to foresee their attitudes and future behaviour.

Recently interest in the topic of interculturalism among scientists has increased significantly: they analyse various aspects related to multiculturalism, such as intercultural communication, its efficiency, models (Liu & Lee, 2008), formation of intercultural teams and the efficiency of their performance (Lloyd and Hartel, 2009; Oerlemans and Peeters, 2010), application of Western management styles in different cultures (Linehan and Shullion, 2000), possibilities for immigrants to adapt to the new environment and the efficiency of their performance (Jordan and Cartwright, 1998; Bhatti, Battour, Ismail, 2013), the efficiency of intercultural training (Graf, 2003), etc. Scientific literature more often mentions features of global leaders (Hurn 1999; Stanek 2000; Collard, 2007; Bird *et al.*, 2009), especially with the emphasis on their ability to manage cultural diversity. Management theory analyses these problems as diversity management. At present moment the concept 'intercultural competence' is expressed through synonymous terms 'cross-cultural competence', 'cultural competence', 'global competence', 'multicultural competence' etc.

In Lithuania researches on multiculturalism, intercultural competency, and cultural diversity are quite a new scientific area. Jucevičius (2001) analysed cultural characteristics of Lithuanian organizations in the European context, Pruskus (2003) explored multicultural communication and management, Paurienė (2011) examined aspects of development of intercultural competency, Petkevičiūtė (2009, 2010, 2011) contributed significantly to the research on interculturalism in organizations through her analysis of links between intercultural competence and career progression, features of cross-cultural negotiations, intercultural competency of managers, etc.

**The aim of the research** is to evaluate employees' intercultural competency and the need for its development in organizations of Lithuania.

**The object of the research** is employees' intercultural competency in organizations of Lithuania.

**Methods of the research** are comparative analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, survey of respondents, generalisation of results by means of SPSS and Excel programmes, and graphic representation.

## 2. Topicalities of intercultural competency development in a working environment

### 2.1. Environmental pressure on the need for the development of intercultural competency

The interest in employee competences arose in the mid 1980-ies, when McClelland (1973) published an article 'Testing for Competence Rather than Intelligence', where the concept of 'competence' was introduced to replace the concept of 'skill', because the former is wider and covers both the person's behaviour and technical abilities (Stevens, 2012). The dictionary of international words defines the word 'competence' (lat. *competentia* – belonging under the law) first, as an area of issues or phenomena which one is well acquainted with, second, as a total of rights and duties of an officer of an institution/department set by the statute or provisions. Spencer, Spencer (1993), Athey and Orth (1999), Chen and Naquin (2006), Campion, Fink, Rugeberg, Carr, Phillips, Odman (2011) believe that the definition of 'competence' should take into account such dimensions as knowledge, abilities (skills) and attitudes. Intercultural competency is a very complex term, because it builds on another already complex term – culture (Williams, 1983). Culture represents a complex pattern of beliefs, expectations, ideas, values, attitudes and behaviours shared by members of a group or team (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004). Aspects of culture can relate to rituals, ceremonies, language, norms, values, philosophy of life, and a 'feeling' that you might have being with people from this group or team, which might be just a few people or a large number (De Bono, Jones, Van der Heijden, 2008).

Most experts agree that in order to be able to operate competently in the international environment, sociolinguistic, intercultural, communication and psychological skills are essential. Such skills are gradually becoming a priority because in the changing working environment previously acquired competences of the employees may be no longer relevant tomorrow. Scientific research focuses on the issues of effective co-operation of people of different races, cultures, and orientation, determined by the need to be able to communicate in foreign languages, understand other cultures, be aware of the history of different countries, etc. The analysis of 'competencies of the future' should highlight such aspects as flexibility, ability to learn, tolerance, focus on self-improvement, etc. Taking into account the effects of globalization and having the aim to strengthen capacity of managers and employees to adapt more flexibly to the multicultural society and to work effectively in local, foreign and international organizations, intercultural

competence and its sustainable development come into foreground as one of the key dimensions of qualification.

The main distinguishable dimensions of the intercultural competence structure are: cognitive, which requires specific knowledge; behavioural, which requires the appropriate skills; and emotional, which requires certain well-formed attitudes.

It should be noted that due to their interdisciplinary nature researches on international competency are attributed to a multidirectional research area, where equal attention should be paid to the analysis of the impact of several sciences on intercultural competency. For instance, to be able to evaluate whether individuals have the required knowledge of intercultural competency, we have to analyse their perception of the policy of their own or a foreign country, the most important historical phenomenon, economics, geography, art, etc., as well as their ability to compare and contrast similarities and differences. All these constituent parts compose a country's culture, thus it is very important to be acquainted with culture not only through popular legends conveyed by communities, but also through the country's history, art, geographic situation (e.g. dependence on the neighbouring countries, historical commonality, temperament (e.g. southern nations are more emotional, northern nations are more reserved), and the acceptable way of expressing emotions, etc.). Knowledge is also linked to attitudes – a person who knows the object better has a different attitude from a person who lacks this knowledge.

The research conducted by the authors of the article allows to establish the level of the knowledge of employees of Lithuanian organizations necessary for their intercultural competency (Table 1).

**Table 1. The elements of the cognitive dimension. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 corresponds to a very good assessment and 5 – to poor evaluation**

Evaluation of the cognitive dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
I know what the dress code in business meetings is	2.11	1.08
I know how to introduce myself, greet and address foreign nationals when establishing first contact with them	2.12	1.05
I can communicate in a foreign language(s) in my professional activities	2.28	1.08
I know which conversation topics are appropriate and inappropriate when dealing with foreign nationals	2.39	1.02
I know what courtesy expressions foreign nationals that I communicate with use.	2.45	1.13

Evaluation of the cognitive dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can compare different aspects (courtesy expressions, tabootopics, and different customs) with the ones in my culture and can distinguish similarities and differences.	2.57	1.22
I know how to write business letters addressed to foreign nationals	2.64	1.27
I know the customs of foreign nationals that I have to communicate with	2.65	1.19
I know taboo topics of foreign nationals that I have to communicate with	2.74	1.28
I know the perception of rank / subordination in another country	2.95	1.18
I know how to greet a foreign business partner on a festive occasion and in which cases it is appropriate to send business gifts	2.96	1.24

Source: Own study.

The evaluation of the respondents' knowledge (Table 1) necessary for intercultural competency shows that the respondents give higher evaluation to the knowledge that does not require any theoretical preparation and special training, or can be learned in daily working situations and does not differ in other cultures, e.g. the dress code in business meetings ( $M=2.11$ ;  $SD=1.08$ ) or how to establish first contact; average estimates of these respondents are higher than the scale average and correspond to evaluation 'good'. Besides, the respondents quite positively evaluate their language proficiency (in comparison with other elements of the cognitive dimension) – they are able to communicate in their professional area in at least one foreign language ( $M=2.28$ ;  $SD=1.08$ ). The respondents' evaluation of theoretical background or experiential knowledge required in business is lower than the scale average. Only one out of ten respondents gave the highest evaluation to their knowledge of how to write business letters and the perception of rank/subordination in another country; only a few respondents in a hundred know customs and taboo topics of other countries. Thus, based on the above results it is advisable to pay more attention to the enhancement of knowledge the respondents need about the culture and business etiquette of the countries their organisations have strategic partnership with.

Dilthey (1907) in his writings about culture used the term of 'lived experience', where 'lived' means direct resemblance of our significant personal experience models. The aspect of personal experience enriches the term 'culture' with emotion, thus very often foreign literature links intercultural competency, first of all,

with cultural sensitivity. Chen and Starosta (2000) note that cultural sensitivity is a person's ability to create positive atmosphere based on mutual understanding with respect demonstrated to cultural differences, which, in turn, opens the way for effective intercultural communication. Thus employees, who face cultural diversity, need to have certain basic knowledge about their own and foreign cultures and the main 'rules' thereof, as well as to be able to behave properly, i.e. be flexible and adapt to new and unexpected situations and be able to respond adequately (expression of emotions) to the otherness; this is extremely important, because, as we have already mentioned, the emotional aspect is quite significant in intercultural communication.

**Table 2. The elements of the emotional dimension. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 corresponds to a very good assessment, and 5- to poor evaluation**

Evaluation of the emotional dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
I understand and tolerate cultural differences	1.71	0.98
racial differences	1.74	0.99
religious diversity	1.75	1.00
When communicating with foreign nationals I willingly talk about my country, I want to introduce the culture of my country to them	1.84	0.99
When I establish new contacts, I do not give preference to representatives of my nationality	2.32	1.22

Source: Own study.

The respondents' evaluation of the emotional dimension (or attitudes) presented in Table 2 clearly shows that they are characterised by a rather high level of tolerance (cultural differences  $M=1.71$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ; racial differences  $M=1.74$ ,  $SD=0.99$ , religious differences  $M=1.75$ ,  $SD=1,00$ ), a strong desire to present their own country and culture to foreigners ( $M=1.84$ ,  $SD=0.99$ ); however, we should admit that the respondents do not feel quite confident when they establish new contact – only a few respondents out of a hundred gave the highest evaluation to this statement, which means that the majority of the respondents due to some reasons or lack of self-confidence in their knowledge and skills would prefer communicating with people of their own nationality if they were given the opportunity to choose.

Various researches on intercultural competency reveal that it is acquired while a person passes through a number of stages, which, as Fennes and Hapgood (1997) claim, include the process of individual change from strong

ethnocentrism through awareness and understanding, acceptance and respect, and finally, appreciation and valuing, and changing until intercultural competency is acquired.

Ethnocentrism is viewed as a natural situation where people, who have never directly encountered other cultures and do not have any idea of intercultural differences, evaluate the world by the standards of their cultural group. Ethnocentric position is consistent with the nature of culture to protect its own standards and values from the cultural identities of other groups. During the stage of awareness and understanding the person comprehends that intercultural differences exist, understands the reasons of intercultural differences and their impact on human relations, and becomes aware of the impact of stereotypes and preconceptions on relations between different cultures. During the stage of acceptance and respect individuals accept another culture without preconceptions, praise another culture even if they know that the norms and values of this culture contradict their own culture. During the stage of appreciation and valuing the person begins to understand cultural diversity as a source of growth, development and opportunity. This becomes obvious when another culture provides valuable opportunities, which do not exist in one's own culture. During the stage of changing the person acquires new skills and attitudes which are not characteristic of neither the native nor a foreign culture. At the stage of intercultural competency individuals learn to efficiently function and not only preserve their own identity, but also to acknowledge specific features of other cultures.

When this change occurs people acquire new skills which allow them to respond adequately to intercultural problems and find competent solutions.

**Table 3. The elements of the behavioural dimension. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 corresponds to a very good assessment, and 5– to poor evaluation**

Elements of the behavioural dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
I observe and realize what I have learned from communication with other nationalities	2.03	1.02
Communication with a foreign national does not cause stress or man lack of self confidence	2.16	1.13
I know how to deal with new and unexpected situation arising from cultural diversity differences	2.50	1.15
If there is any conflict or misunderstanding due to cultural differences, I know how to solve them	2.51	1.14

Source: Own study.

The respondents did not demonstrate great confidence when evaluating elements of their behaviour (or skills) dimension. Although the evaluation of the perception that intercultural contact has practical benefits and forms some relevant skills is rather high ( $M=2.03$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ), only several respondents out of a hundred do not feel stress when communicating with foreigners and have the skills which enable them to solve unexpected problems that arise from cultural differences or intercultural conflicts. The rest tend to evaluate these skills as average or poor.

To sum up, we can agree with Lepaite (2003), that competency is viewed not as a constituent part of qualification, but rather as a holistic expression of an individual's potential with the focus on personal traits, value assumptions and the ability to realise the accumulated potential and experience in practice. When we talk about the organizations readiness to manage cultural diversity, first we need to think about its employees' competency which could ensure an individual's ability to manage relevant sources and understand the change and the environment, thus being able to ensure the success of the organization.

## 2.2. What challenges do we face in intercultural communication?

However, Deardoff (2008) claims that proficiency in a foreign language is not enough for a person to be interculturally competent, in other words, proficiency in a foreign language is a necessary, but at the same time insufficient element of intercultural competence. The author also notes that it is nearly impossible to acquire intercultural competence at minimal expense; it requires constant targeted development. For this reason, in order to develop intercultural competence individuals need to improve their abilities to learn. This competence should be considered not as something inherent, but rather as a result of a person's constant evolution and development (Hoopes, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Byram, 2004). Fantini (2006) notes that establishment of contacts and communication with people who speak other languages and are from different cultures provide excellent opportunities to develop intercultural competence; however, the process is often life-long, thus it is possible to state that in terms of intercultural competence the process of 'becoming competent' is more important. It cannot be terminal, since cultures constantly change, and contacts between cultures reveal new problematic situations and the necessity to comprehend the changed environment. A frequent obstacle to the development of intercultural competence is the preconception or groundless prejudices against foreign nationals, which are formed by the surrounding environment of a person. Liebsch and Petkevičiūtė (2005) view groundless prejudices or preconception as an irrational feeling or a sense of dislike or hatred based on direct experiences and stories from other people. Usually

preconception or prejudices are determined by the lack of knowledge about the object. This attitude is supported by Krizan, Merrier, Logan, Williams (2008), who note that the lack of knowledge about the diversity of cultures and misunderstanding of other cultures give rise to certain stereotypes – people who have negative experience while communicating with a representative of another culture in the future tend to project that negative characteristics on all foreigners. Thus it is important not only to acquire the necessary knowledge in the formal training process and in this way form positive attitudes towards foreign nationals, but also to encourage the development of the necessary skills through work experience and practice, through changing the way of thinking and the attitude towards intercultural differences in the working environment.

Respondents from the analysed organizations were asked to indicate problems which they believe hinder effective intercultural communication.

**Table 4. Evaluation of the problematic aspects**

Most usual causes of problems arising in the process of communicating with foreign nationals	Mean	Std. Deviation
.... insufficient language proficiency	2.36	1.36
... on the staff neglect other nationalities	3.14	1.43
.... different style of informal communication	3.14	1.31
.... different perception of relationship between managers and subordinates	3.16	1.34
.... different ways of decision-making	3.18	1.34
.... poor understanding of a foreign culture	3.21	1.36
.... different temperament	3.26	1.36
.... poor understanding of etiquette	3.31	1.34
.... different taboo topics	3.56	1.38
.... different religion	3.73	1.42

Source: Own study.

Most respondents indicated inadequate language proficiency as the main problem in communicating with foreigners ( $M=2.36$ ,  $SD=1.36$ ), in contrast, other aspects were evaluated as less important and much lower than the scale average. Elements related to tolerance, such as different taboo topics or different religion, were evaluated by the respondents as having least effect on problematic situations; some respondents admitted that problems in intercultural communication arise due to the employees' reluctance and lack of interest in other nationals.

## Conclusions

The active process of communication with foreign nationals will become more intense in the near future, which will require to pay special attention to a deeper analysis of the issues of multiculturalism. Thus, organizations which do not pay enough attention to the development of their employees' knowledge of multiculturalism, positive attitudes and relevant skills, take the risk of facing problems in building up and maintaining international contacts, expanding their business and competing successfully. The research results show that the respondents, irrespective of having fragmented knowledge (only each eleventh-fifteenth respondent is familiar with the elements of the cognitive dimension: the knowledge of how to draw up business letters addressed to foreign nations, the perception of rank and subordination in another country, the awareness of how to congratulate a foreign colleague or business partner on a festive occasion, etc.) and lack of practical skills (only a few respondents out of a hundred give the highest evaluation to their ability to solve misunderstandings and conflicts, which arise out of cultural differences, and their behavioural skills in a new cultural diversity), demonstrate high level of tolerance towards foreign nationals and do not see any serious hindrances to cooperation with foreigners.

Thus we can draw the conclusion that there is no doubt that employees of Lithuanian organizations understand the importance of communication with foreign nationals and the benefits of the development of this process and acquiring intercultural competency.

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