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COOPERATION IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS— EXPERIENCES RELATED TO THE ECMT+ INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

Abstract: Nowadays, cultural diversity is an inherent feature of the working environment and it is highly promoted by a lot of projects. Increasing student mobility lead to in more frequent interactions between the representatives of different cultures, this skill is needed on current market labor. The purpose of this paper is to explore and evaluate students' reflections on cooperation in multicultural teams. The applied study includes a qualitative research method of a reflective essay among students participating in the two-week Intensive Programme that took place at University in Finland. They represented one from seven high education institutions from seven different European countries. In order to better understand the theoretical background, authors provide the literature reviews, both Polish and foreign. The closing section of the paper is emphasizing the significant impact of intercultural interaction, positive effects and the specificity and principles of work in a multicultural team.

Key words: culture, multiculturalism, international management, multicultural teams, multinational corporations, human capital management

JEL Classification: L26; M14

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it is increasingly noticeable that more and more various enterprises recognize the huge potential resulting from building international and multicultural teams. What is more, work in many enterprises ceases to be the domain only of one nationality, and more often it is based on

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cooperation of specialists from nearly all over the world. Unification of procedures, requirements and rules in force in a given organization, as well as universally expected knowledge of foreign languages mean that people from different cultures contact each other almost every day in working life. These cultures shape the values, norms and behavior of employees of international companies creating a common organizational culture of a given enterprise. It is obvious, that employees need to learn about the habits of other nationalities, accept them and learn how to cooperate. At the same time, each of these entities has its own culture and its own values, which mutually penetrate under the influence of the culture of the home country as well as the countries in which the operations are carried out [Rozkwitalska, 2009, p. 227]. Undoubtedly, globalization, as well as the growing development of the outsourcing services sector, even enforces the need to cooperate with contractors from almost every country. Moreover, working in a multicultural environment will be more and more a standard on the Polish market. This is an extremely common phenomenon. Currently, especially human capital management plays a key role in international companies. They must not only take care of their professional image through continuous improvement of own qualifications, but also follow current trends and practices in the face of changes in human capital management.

The main purpose of the article is to present an analysis of the literature on the subject concerning intercultural management and present the findings of the positive effects of work in multicultural teams. In addition, the qualitative analysis and evaluation of research conducted among students of Poznan University of Technology, who were participants of the Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams Project - ECMT+ will be presented. The purpose of the study is to extent fill the gap in the literature on the subject in the context of human capital management. The considerations presented in the article may serve a more comprehensive understanding of interpersonal interactions in a culturally diverse environment, which are related not only to, how it might seem, with barriers, but also with important positive effects.

1. COOPERATION IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS – THEORETICAL APPROACH

Currently, one of the main effects of the globalization is the increasingly frequent formation of intercultural teams. According to Brunner and Gabel, in 2003 multinational corporations employed around 90 million people around the all over the world [Franz, 2012, p.76]. This huge number of employees shows how important is the ability to work in multicultural teams. To better understand the whole concept of cooperation in multicultural teams, authors decide to start with short explanation of meaning of culture' definition, because it has several

aspects, including an organizational culture aspect, wherein researchers emphasize the diversity of nationality and ethnicity [Edewor, Aluko, 2007, p.189]. Goffee and Jones [1996, p.134] define culture as a community that interacts with each other, that is, they interact with different views. These communities form intercultural teams in which they share information and try to cooperate. Intercultural organizations are a kind of phenomenon, they combine individualities identifying with different cultures, and at the same time all members strive for a common result despite differences [Mazur, 2010, pp.5-8]. The specificity of that kind of teams results from their diversity, i.e. cultural differences, because each cultural group has exceptional and unique patterns of behavior, values, beliefs and own language [Schein, 2004, pp.13-14]. Cultural diversity can be defined as “the representation, in one social system, of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance” [Cox, 1993, p. 6] and it can be divided into three dimensions, which are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of diversity

Primary dimensions	Secondary dimensions	Tertiary dimensions
Race Ethnicity Gender Age Disability	Religion Culture Sexual orientation Thinking style Geographic origin Family status Lifestyle Economic status Political orientation Work experience Education Language Nationality	Beliefs Assumptions Perceptions Attitudes Feelings Values Group norms

Source: own study based on R. Rijamampinina, T. Carmichael, A Pragmatic and Holistic Approach to Managing Diversity. Problems and Perspectives in Management, 1/2005, p. 110.

Increasing diversity is the result of socio-economic and political changes that have taken place in the twentieth century. In a very short time, companies around the world began to transform from mono- to multicultural, this trend was called Multicultural Organization Development (MCO) [Jackson, Holvino, 1998, p. 5]. The general definition of multicultural organizations according to Jackson and Hardiman can be assume that it is an organization in which various social and cultural groups contribute positive changes in all areas of the company and organization is equally managed by people from different groups [Komives, Woodard, 2003, pp. 427-428]. Jackson and Holvino in 1988 expanded the definition of intercultural organizations, recognizing that such an organization aims

to incessant learn and make the necessary systemic changes to treat all cultural groups in the organization fairly [Jackson, 2006, pp.139-142]. In 1992, Chesler and Crowfoot created a list of key elements to transform the organization from mono- to multicultural. The authors indicated to the following areas [Jackson, Holvino, 1998, p. 18]:

- change of organization policy,
- introduction of socially responsible activities,
- striving for equality and eliminating discrimination,
- integration of all groups,
- constantly support for employee' development,
- increase diversity in all organization,
- joint decision making / multi-level responsibility,
- flexible work structures.

Moreover, Jackson proposed one of the simplest definition of the development of intercultural organizations. According to it, MCOOD means working for social diversity and justice at all levels of the organization [Jackson, 2008, p.179].

Further, intercultural management, according to Jacob [2003, pp.2-21], is an area whose interests oscillate around human resources management in a culturally diverse environment. The goal of an intercultural management is to ensure effective activities of diversified staff. According to the definition proposed by Rozkwitalska [2012, pp. 16-21], intercultural management provides knowledge, which is enable to cooperation of people from different cultures.

In the literature occur terms of international management and international human resource management, which are often treated interchangeably for multicultural management. International management is subject to classification due to the level of international business activity, what is presented on the Figure 1.

Figure 1. Level of international activity



Source: own study based on Griffin, 1998, p. 168.

The most common definition of the term international human resources management concerns the methods of human resources management in enterprises operating on an international scale [Sparrow, Brewster, Harris, 2004, p.1].

International human resource management includes problems experienced by enterprises operating on a national basis, and problems characteristic only for multinational companies. According to the definition proposed by Listwan, international human resources management covers activities focused on achieving international goals and satisfy the needs of employees of the organization [Stor, 2010, p.409]. International human resources management is connected with the concept of intercultural management through the multicultural conditions existing in international organizations. The range of interest in intercultural management as a scientific discipline overlaps with international organizational behavior and international human resources management, and a relatively short period of research in this discipline may mean the imminent emergence of new issues related to intercultural management.

2. THE CURRENT PERFORMANCE OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN FRAME OF MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

Firstly, it is no doubt that continuously development is very much needed on the current labor market. Due to the lack of one unambiguous definition, globalization can be treated very much differently, extremely, or based on ideological evaluations. In general, it comes from certain conditions of the process treated as much as possible [Bielański, Biernat, 1999, p. 148]. These are: worldwide scale, weight and method of solving interactions to a greater or lesser extent on the development of all societies possible to defeat only with better, broad and multifaceted cooperation of all parties [Maśloch, 2005, p. 17].

Nowadays, for more and more companies in Poland is very necessarily that their employees have a lot of different business knowledge included international experience. It is compulsory for candidates and employees to know European standards and be able to work in a variety teams, taking into consideration cultural diversity. Management skills are not everything, but first of all people need soft skills and need a professional and empathic approach to other team members, bearing in mind their personality, current knowledge and experiences.

Thanks to multicultural teams, enterprises can more effectively meet the requirements and needs of international clients. We can observe the following effects of globalization in terms of their impact on the development of modern civilization: scientific and technical progress, international competition, crossing borders, unlimited information flow, building lasting relationships with suppliers, customers, competitors, economic power of companies, change of traditional connections between the creation process material goods, flows financial and information, competitiveness and effects of experience and reduction of unit costs [Maśloch, 2005, p. 25].

However, cooperation in culturally diverse teams also has many disadvantages, such as misunderstandings, conflicts, lack of trust. The most important barrier may be verbal communication or a common language, because often not all members of the team use it to the same extent. This can lead to problems in mutual understanding, which in turn increases the time when making important business decisions and reduces the efficiency of meetings. Team members may have different expectations in relation to the others and a different style of work. Another problem may be differences in nonverbal communication.

According to Daniels and Radebaugh, in intercultural situations peoples should beware of extreme attitudes, e.g. egocentrism and polycentrism, which do not ensure success in the activities of the company. In the case of egocentrism, the threat consists in ignoring differences and favoring one's own national culture, and as a result many misunderstandings and conflicts can arise – especially on the manager-subordinate line. Polycentrism – bringing cultural differences to the forefront – may lead to the loss of one's identity by the organization and the impossibility of implementing its own coherent strategy. Hence, in this situation, units operating in individual countries will act independently, imitating the habits of the environment [Kaczmarek, 2016, p. 92].

The intercultural interaction results in much more positive aspects, and the most indisputable is the opportunity to improve foreign languages or learn about new cultures, and thus deepen your knowledge about the world. The following may be considered less obvious: experience in working in a diverse environment, a greater understanding of the needs of international clients, and increasing the level of service for foreign clients. Cultural diversity promotes better use of the potential of individual members of the organization, it results from greater tolerance and openness towards culturally different collaborators. It is obvious that the self-confident employee more willingly expresses his own opinions, and the willingness to exchange views allows for sharing knowledge, broadening horizons and enriching the experience with other members in multicultural groups, which is the basis for improving their competence [Rozkwitalska, 2013, p. 209]. Increased creativity is definitely one of the greatest advantages of the existence of intercultural teams and in literature it is the most often described positive aspect [Bouncken, Ratzmann, Winkler, 2008, p. 26-36]. In addition, it should be noticed that the leader plays an important role in each team, most challenging if the team consist of team members from all over the world and from different cultural backgrounds. Employees should follow leader and treat it as a role model of attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, he should be open to new ideas, easy to make new contacts, strongly motivated, willingness to constantly learn and develop. The leader should be above all tolerant, accept the diversity of team members and be able to easily adapt to changes [Gadomska-Lila, 2011, p. 11]. Only through appropriate and well thought leadership of the team, success can

be achieved, and the set common goals that involve all members will positively affect the results of the work.

3. METHOD, RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH

To better understanding of the discussed issue and to get to know the potential benefits of international cooperation, the authors decided to conduct the qualitative research, which will help to familiarize with topic of trends and changes occurring in human resource management in the face of new challenges. The results of qualitative research will be presented below. The study has been conducted anonymously.

Qualitative research was carried out among students of Poznan University of Technology, who were participants of the Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams Project (ECMT+). ECMT+ is an Erasmus+ strategic partnership project. In this project 7 high education institutions from 7 different European countries work together for developing students' entrepreneurial mind-set, practices and multicultural communication skills. It promotes teachers' expertise by creating a community of practice and strengthens the links between the higher education institutions (HEIs) and industry. In addition, ECMT+ strengthens HEIs working life relevance developing education that responds to the needs of the local businesses and expands the understanding of the potential of the international cooperation and networks [Badzińska, 2017, pp. 320-327].

The aim of research was an analysis based on a reflective essay written by each of participant of ECMT+. Students had the possibility to organize essay as they want. The topics provided were only indicative, they could add other issues, because the proposed questions were like a pattern, example.

In their analysis, the authors of the article included two areas of questions: "Me and the others" and "Entrepreneurship". They analyzed the answers to the following questions:

- What did you learn about yourself? About your relationship with other?
- Do you now feel more ready to solve problems in the team in the future? Why, or why not?
- Compare your experience in working in a national team to working in a multicultural team.
- What are the differences related to the business environment in your home country and in your partners' countries?
- Do you think you will start a business in the future? Why?
- What new culture-related issues did you learn?
- Do you now feel more ready to solve problems in the team in the future? Why, or why not?

First of all, for majority of respondents the international workshop was the first opportunity to learn collaborate in multicultural teams. They selves emphasized this in their essays: *"Before the program I did not take the cultural differences into account because my country is more or less homogenous", "I was working in international team for the first time and this was most difficult for me"*. Lack of experience in working in international groups aroused fear in the respondents, as it turned out, unnecessary: *"During the course I was most afraid that I would not get close relationships with my group and that my knowledge would not be enough to contribute to the work. Everyone I worked with was an open person and my fears turned out to be unfounded"*.

The respondents emphasized that intercultural interactions give the opportunity to share knowledge, enrich the experience, broaden the horizons of thought, the multitude of perspectives of looking and learning: *"Because of our other nationalities, cultures and points of view I think that companies with employee not from only 1 country have bigger chances to achieve success. What is more, working with people from different parts of the world we receive: wide look on many issues, new experiences and for sure important skill: carrying on quite new situation "*. The effect of the multitude of perspectives and experiences, diversity of views, attitudes, knowledge or education systems that participants of the survey have noticed, has led to wealth of ideas and increased creativity, also triggered discussions about ideas and overcome cultural diversity problems: *"In national teams we do not have to be that flexible with presenting our ideas for a particular topic because most of us have the same cultural background and it makes it easier to agree with each other", "in multicultural teams there is more factors to overcome, especially the cultural background and different approaches to a particular topic in each country"*.

Another respondent pointed out that intercultural contacts are necessary and what is more, he emphasized that there were no barriers between international lecturers and students, which greatly improved communication skills. Lecturers were very involved in our work, which motivated to solve the problems and whole work was more effectively. He feels that *"education in other countries is more modern and practical"* and *"I learned a lot of new things, from six thinking hats to creating business plans, canvas model and market penetration"*.

The opinions of the students also included references to the many positive effects obtained as a result of contacts with foreigners. Most frequently mentioned positive effect is improvement of English skills. All respondents agreed that workshop changed their English skills for better: *"During the workshop I learned many new words and phrases in English", "Working in an international team needs to overcome language barriers, but it carries so many different ideas and different visions that it becomes amazing", "my English level definitely increased"*. Furthermore, they learnt professional vocabulary and trained using

these words in practice – in dialogue, not only in theory: *“Most winning for me in this topic was practical use of other language in real multicultural environment”, “I appreciate this experience very much. I improved my English, I didn’t learn many new words, but I used numerous words in the conversation for the first time”*.

Moreover, participants of the survey underlined that work in multicultural team is brilliant chance to build valuable and lasting social relationship with new, interesting people: *“Now I know how interesting are people from another country”, “I know that I will keep in touch for years with the people I met”* or *“due to this project I had an opportunity to learn from experienced and talented people, listen about their own chances, beginnings and failures. I hope this will have a great impact on my future”*. The meeting with other cultures gave a chance to understand them what is very important in current world: *“The EMCT+ program taught me a lot about respect for other cultures. I met people not only from Europe, but also from India, Vietnam and it was a pleasure to cooperate with everyone”*. This opportunity also affects the self-confidence of the workshop participants and the experience of working in an international team has helped students to open up: *“I was working in an international team for the first time and this was most difficult for me, but now I am more open, so I appreciate this experience very much”, “I gained a lot of self-confidence in contact with people, especially from the ones from another countries”, “during the workshop I learned new things about myself, including the fact that I have no problems developing international friendships”*. Higher self-confidence can be very helpful in the future, when participants will undertake work in teams: *“Project encouraged me to step out from my comfort zone, learn a lot of new business skills and connect with involved and motivated people to get my future business running”, “now I feel more ready to work in any team”*.

Lastly students perceived higher quality of work like a benefit of multicultural teams, one of aspects higher quality is already recalled wealth of ideas. Creativity in team can be aroused by brainstorming: *“I learned that most efficient way to actually move forward working in the group was brainstorming and it really developed my point of teamwork”*. Also awareness of differences translates into a higher quality of work: *“This is due to differences between entrepreneurship in Poland and other countries. Now I see that entrepreneurship is very complex, but interesting too”, “I I have learned quite a lot during these two weeks. The most interesting for me was a totally new attitude to management and business. It changed my view on start-ups which will hopefully provide profit in the future. I appreciated a lot of new pedagogical methods, because it forces us to develop our business ideas faster and more efficient. There I met what the Business Model Canvas is and how helpful it can be in starting-up an enterprise.*

In my country we do not have so many opportunities during lectures and exercises to work on business ideas like these during the program”.

Persons participating in the research, explicitly stressed that contacts with representatives of other cultures are an important factor in personal development, because they enable learning, improving one's own skills (e.g. intercultural communication, working in a multicultural team) and gaining valuable experience. Attention was also paid to the benefits of establishing interpersonal contacts. Positive sides of relationships with foreigners the students noticed even though their previous international relations were definitely less frequent and less intense. This indicates huge potential being in this type of contacts – potential that can be transformed into a resource non-material multicultural organization.

Opinions obtained during the survey allowed to confirm the results of the research presented by other authors in the subject literature, and shed new light on the issue of intercultural interactions. But referring to the results of the presented research, one should remember about them restrictions, i.e. their preliminary nature and a small research sample or the method of selection used, which exclude far-reaching generalizations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that currently human resources departments play a major role in every international company. Current research indicates the tendency in the transformation of the roles of managers and specialists in human resources management and the increasing level of their professionalism [Raczek, 2016, p. 182]. The more important is the involvement of the HR department, when the team consists not only of employees from one country. The HR department should engage in active implementation of the company's strategic goals, including employees from different cultures, taking into account their habits, behavior patterns and attitudes.

The results of the qualitative research show numerous advantages of building multicultural teams. The team members appreciated, first of all, the opportunity to improve foreign languages while interacting with other team members. Moreover, most of the international workshop participants emphasized:

- wealth of ideas and growth of creativity,
- chance to build social relationships with interesting people from all world,
- opportunity to exchange of knowledge and experience,
- deepening understanding for other cultures,
- increased self-confidence,
- and higher quality of work

as benefits of work in multicultural teams. In multicultural management, often it is assumed that a culture derived from nationality influences the roles played by

individual members of the team. It is the result of the fact that modern enterprises operating on foreign markets need to employ employees and contractors from different countries and different cultures. They present different systems of values, norms of behavior and customs. The essence is to find a way to assimilate diversity, which is in turn the basic condition for operating and operating in an international environment [Kaczmarek, 2016, p. 94]. Based on the reflections of participants it can be stated that multicultural approach to multicultural cooperation was met with high level of acceptance by them and brought benefits.

What is more, it is therefore necessary to find the best solution for everybody and know the border between the extremes and to take action towards understanding other cultures. Cultural diversity increases sensitivity to the needs of different markets, improves innovation, creativity and the organization's ability to solve problems. Thus, it may constitute a source of competitive advantage for an enterprise operating on international markets.

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WSPÓŁPRACA W ZESPOŁACH WIELOKULTUROWYCH DOŚWIADCZENIA ZWIĄZANE Z PROJEKTEM MIĘDZYNARODOWYM ECMT +

Streszczenie: Nieodłączną cechą dzisiejszych przedsiębiorstw jest wszechobecna różnorodność kulturowa, a umiejętność pracy między przedstawicielami różnych kultur jest niezwykle ceniona na rynku pracy. Celem artykułu jest zapoznanie się z refleksjami studentów na temat współpracy międzykulturowej. Ich analizę przeprowadzono za pomocą jakościowej metody badawczej. Aby lepiej zrozumieć podstawy teoretyczne, autorzy dokonali przeglądu literatury. W końcowej części artykułu podkreślono znaczący wpływ interakcji międzykulturowych, jej pozytywne efekty oraz specyfikę i zasady pracy w zespole wielokulturowym.

Słowa kluczowe: kultura, wielokulturowość, zarządzanie pmiędzynarodowe, zespoły wielokulturowe, wielonarodowe korporacje, zarządzanie kapitałem ludzkim