# Corporate Commitment to Diversity in the Local Perspective of the Polish Subsidiary of a Multinational Corporation: A Qualitative Exploratory Study

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** Diversity is emerging as one of the key pillars of corporate social responsibility. The purpose of this study is to challenge the universal concept of diversity and inclusion by obtaining practical insight into local phenomena.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The empirical findings draw from communication campaigns and in-depth interviews.

**Findings:** It has become apparent that diversity management does not transcend organisational or national boundaries. The results suggest that diversity practitioners ought to take into consideration the historical, political, and cultural contexts.

**Research and practical limitations/implications:** Communication campaigns rather than other management practices were examined. Future research should study the complexities of local diversity management practices and take into account the operational challenges faced by employees in different departments. This study sheds light on the necessity to adapt carefully best practices that stem from corporate assumptions.

**Originality/value:** Finally, few studies have deepened the knowledge of diversity management in Eastern European countries, even if the topic plays an important role in the changing business environment and European integration.
**Paper type:** exploratory case study.

**Keywords:** diversity, communication campaign, Poland.

## 1. Introduction

The European Commission provides a broad definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society" (European Commission, 2016) that encompasses principles relating to human rights in the business environment. European integration is based upon certain common values, such as freedom, democracy, equality, respect for human rights, and the rule of law (European Parliament, 2016). The motto of the European Union is to remain "unified in diversity" (Kraus, 2006), while the current macro-institutional debate calls for recognition of the political, economic, and demographic environments, as opposed to the mainstream approach of the European policies.

The mergers and acquisitions of formerly state-owned Polish companies, followed by UE entry in 2004, have contributed to the emergence of diversity management, which plays an important role in the changing business environment and European integration. The implementation of global strategies, policies, and management practices has become subject to analysis of the social environments. Diversity management has attracted growing interest among scholars and organisations, as it is considered as a consequence of the internationalization process and a mean of increasing competitiveness in the globalized economy (Maj, 2017).

According to the demographic projections of the World Bank, a population decline is expected to occur in Eastern Europe. As a result of a rise in the elderly population, there is an increasing need to deal with multiple economic and social challenges (World Bank, 2015), such as active aging, productivity, innovation, and adaptability to the workforce of the future. Those challenges are not only associated with socioeconomic transformations but particularly with the simultaneous transformation of the workforce within organisations (Emmott and

Worman, 2008). In addition, with the recent tendency to shift from democratization (Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2008) toward protectionism or even nationalism, international companies may call into question the future of the diverse workforce. The shortage of a qualified workforce caused by emigration (Halik, Kosowicz and Marek, 2009) enhances multinationals' need to make a vigorous effort to attract and retain talented people from around the world. Of equal if not greater importance is that organisations value multicultural teams for their contribution to the overall organisational effectiveness and innovation (Bellard and Rüling, 2001; Cox and Blake, 1991), which are essential to gain techno-economic competitive advantage. Finally, rapidly evolving business environments have given rise to client-centred approaches and business models. Diversity and inclusion policies tend to set the direction to meet the needs of diverse clients within both the international and local communities. All these phenomena have contributed to the transfer of 'Western' diversity management policies and practices (Laurent, 1983) to post-socialist economies in transition, as what is called the "one best way" (Hurt and Hurt, 2005). Although Polish firms seem to be closer to an infancy stage in the model of organisational maturity in managing diversity (Wieczorek-Szymańska, 2017), it is not surprising that many of them implement policies and strategies in various ways.

This paper is an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the adoption of a corporate diversity commitment by the Polish subsidiary of a multinational corporation. The aim was to reveal the meso (organisational) and micro (individual) levels of interpretation so as to propose a more realistic and contextual framework of diversity management. As a more practical benefit of the research, we consider a better understanding of the peculiarities of a Polish approach to the effective communication campaigns on diversity and inclusion.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The origins of the concept of diversity management (DM)
A few decades ago, the Anglo-Saxon model of diversity (Özbilgin, 2005) emerged as equal opportunity and affirmative actions (Sanders and Belghiti-Malhut, 2011; Shen, Chanda, D'Netto and Monga, 2009) and has its roots in the American legislation related to the discrimination of ethnical minorities. While the US government tried to block

the legislation, Affirmative Actions (AA) (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998) consultants, under the threat of losing national support and therefore their jobs, proposed to shift the focus from the moral message related to discrimination into the organisational performance driven discourse and 'return on investment' for diversity.

The question of equality and equal opportunities (Chanlat, 2017) is also active in the French debate over diversity and sheds a light on the particularly arduous problems of ethno-racial segregation within society and organisations. In the context of France, diversity policies are drawn from national and European legislation, scientific debate, creation of associations and foundations (Chanlat, 2017) and ultimately the business input. French scholars clearly identify the issues of 'otherness' and social integration of immigrants and minorities, as proxies for more complex underlying anthropological characteristics of diversity phenomena.

Although derived from public policies, diversity management is widely recognized in management studies (Chanlat, 2017; Kersten 2000; Kramar, 2012; Tatli, Vassilopoulou, Ariss and Özbilgin, 2012). Diversity management can be defined as: "planning, coordination and implementation of a set of management strategies, policies, initiatives, and training and development activities" (Özbilgin, 2005). In this sense, studies clearly highlight the role that management of diversity plays for individuals, organisations (Kossek, Markel and McHugh, 2005; Raza and Tariq, 2016) and society (Chanlat, 2017; Tatli et al., 2012). To outline a more recent picture of the research on diversity management, it is important to highlight the polysemic character of the notion of diversity, which has been analysed in transversal and interdisciplinary theories presenting different research streams that can be summarized as follows: mainstream research (focused on the benefits of diversity for organisational competitiveness and performance (Bruna and Chanlat, 2011; Cox and Blake, 1991); postmodernist literature (Kyriakidou, Dedoulis, Kyriacou and Özbilgin, 2016) (focus on a subordination of diverse groups and power-imbalanced relations); critical studies (Kersten, 2000; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop and Nkomo, 2010) (focused on practices, rhetoric, discourse, concept, ideology); and contextualized approaches to diversity management (Chanlat, 2017; Özbilgin, 2005).

## 2.2. Diversity management from the local perspective

The present study adopts a perspective closely associated with the critical approach to diversity management (Kersten, 2000) acknowledging the role that context plays in shaping organisational initiatives (Rijamampianina and Carmichael, 2005) seen through the national characteristics of diversity management. The critical perspective stems from various meanings and interpretations of the concept of diversity that has been an extremely fruitful area for researchers over the past two decades (Dupuis, 2017; Ester de Freitas, 2017; Özbilgin, 2005; Rojo and Beauregard, 2017; Tatli et al., 2012). Although, diversity management is a conceptually attractive discourse, it appears to be insignificant in multiple contexts, as it is considered to be a socially constructed phenomenon (Chanlat, 2017). Many scholars (Christiansen and Just, 2012) criticize the specific perspective that categorized managing diversity as a "narrow capitalistic emphasis" on business case (Özbilgin and Syed, 2009) and advocate a contextual, multi-layered and 'situated' analysis that seems to be more authentic and comprehensive. Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) propose an 'emic' understanding of diversity management taking into account geographical and temporal context of the local subsidiaries.

It seems that multiple empirical studies propose to challenge the Anglo-Western conceptualizations of diversity management (Chanlat et al., 2013) when transposed into different countries (e.g., the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, England, the United States and the Visegrád Group) (Bellard and Rüling, 2011; Boxenbaum, 2006; Eger and Indruchová, 2014 ; Egerova and Jiřincová, 2014; Jones, Pringle and Shepherd, 2000; Kamp and Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2004; Kramar, 2012; Risberg and Søderberg, 2008). Diversity research emphasizes the significance of culturally heterogeneous geographies (e.g., Africa, Asia, and South America) (Özbilgin and Syed, 2009). However, some studies propose an original perspective for studying diversity management and yet still focus on homogeneous countries (e.g., Denmark) (Christiansen and Just, 2012).

The field of diversity management seems to be ambivalent especially regarding the organisational outcomes. Given the continued struggle to solve deeply rooted diversity issues both from a managerial and an academic perspective, a debate on diversity management has been particularly heterogeneous and there are multiple dissonant voices. Despite conceptual differences regarding diversity in developing

countries, organisations are, in general, committed to build a diverse and inclusive environment with appropriate management in order to enhance innovation. However, this is not universally the case. Accordingly, western societies converge in the implicit economic arguments related to the immigration status of their situations and they promote the multicultural, neo-liberal approaches of globalization (Humphries and Grice, 1995). Research relying mainly on existing theories inspired by the French and Anglo-Saxon models of diversity becomes extremely difficult to operationalize in different contexts (for example, Poland). We argue that the mainstream research on the Anglo-Western model of diversity management should be contextualized.

## 3. The case study

The study is conducted in a global electricity company that covers the sector of nuclear, thermal, and renewable energies, with headquarters located in France. The company is present in Europe, Asia, and North and South America, with around 32 subsidiaries. Our study proposes a contextualized analysis of diversity management in an under-researched context. The central objective of the exploratory case study is to examine two diversity communication campaigns deployed at the Polish subsidiary level. The first corporate campaign was supposed to be implemented in its original version as a part of the global policy. However, the illustrations and the narrative were rejected and then adapted by local managers. The second local campaign is an example of contextualizing diversity campaign as it is focused on the characteristics of diversity that are not recognized at the headquarters level.

From the first of June 2006, the company has been engaged in promoting diversity and preventing discrimination across subsidiaries and within its business units. This global diversity ambition has been transcribed into local action plans discussed during regular follow- ups between headquarters and subsidiaries. However, the subsidiaries usually have their own agendas on diversity, and some of them emphasize different aspects. For example, the headquarters has a department called Diversity, Performance, and Innovation, dedicated to diversity, gender equality, age, disability management, and quality of life at the workplace. Meanwhile, the commitment to diversity in the Polish subsidiary

appears as an integral part of the Ethics/Compliance and Diversity strategy; the values of equality and fairness are more directly considered, with the focus on the cognitive aspects of diversity.

## 4. Data collection and methodology

Interviews, observations, and internal documentation allowed to query the particularities of diversity representation in the Polish subsidiary, both at the meso (organisational) and micro (individual) level. The investigation provided insight into the challenges that Anglo-Western global companies would encounter when transferring diversity policies to their Eastern subsidiaries. The research was based on the qualitative method.

First, we conducted open-ended interviews, 19 of them on site and two by phone (cf. Table 1). It should be acknowledged that the interview questions evolved during the conversations, especially when the interviewees encountered difficulties in providing their opinions on diversity. The interviews were one hour to one and a half hours long, enabling the interviewees to express their ideas openly and spontaneously. In consideration of the open-ended questionnaire (Table 2) with attention given to the new relevant themes, the data was analysed manually. The information was gathered through participation at collective meetings, informal conversations, and 40 hours' observations in the company between 26th of August and 2nd of September 2016.

**Table 1.** Interview list

| Manage-ment level | On-site interview | Tele-phone interview | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| Specialists | 2 Auditors, Mechanical Inspector | | 26/08/2016 |
| Managers | Quality & Environmental Manager, Communications Manager, Human Resources Manager, Contract Manager, Trainings Manager, Quality Management Specialist, HR Business Partner, Diversity & Compliance Manager, Treasury Manager | Communication Manager | 29/08/2016  30/08/2016 |

| Table 1. continued | Manage-ment level | On-site interview | Tele-phone interview | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Directors | Compliance Director, Process & Support Director, Risk Management Director, IT Director, Finance Director, Board Executive Quality & Environmental Director, Corporate Communications Director | Ethics and Social Affairs Director | 13/09/2016 01/09/2016 31/08/2016 |

Source: own results

**Table 2.** Interview's questions

| Manage-ment level | Questions |
|---|---|
| Specialists Managers Directors | I began each interview by asking the interviewee details about her/himself (nationality, previous experience in the company, seniority). |
| | Have you heard about diversity in this organisation? |
| | What does the concept of diversity mean for you? |
| | Could you describe it? |
| | What do you think about inclusion in this organisation? (*After presenting a definition at the corporate level*) |
| | Would you like to work in a more diverse organisation? |
| | What are diversity management practices in this organisation? |
| | Is it important to communicate on diversity? Why? |
| | What do you think of diversity communication campaign? *[French and Polish campaign were presented to the interviewees]* |
| | What do you think about the diversity of gender, age, disability, nationality, religion and sexual orientation? |
| | What aspects of diversity are valued? Why? |
| | What steps are being taken to overcome a reluctance to recognize diversity? |

Source: own results

## 5. Key findings

### 5.1. Meso level

The first part of the findings draws upon the analysis of two communication campaigns organised during diversity weeks in 2015 and 2016. The purpose of the first global diversity campaign conceived at headquarters was to counter stereotypes related to five dimensions:

gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion, and there-fore prevent discrimination across the organisations. We found that the Polish subsidiary rejected the visual and textual content of the French version and created its own. The Polish title was "Openness for Diversity Makes Better Cooperation at Work". However, the Polish version highlighted only three dimensions i.e. age, gender, and disability, while omitting religion and sexual orientation. Considering these insights, we can propose two main hypotheses and attempt to explain why the promotion of diversity in the Polish context does not include religion or sexual orientation. The first hypothesis is that a lack of cultural and organisational compatibility may be embodied in management practices. The second hypothesis is that the organisational diversity adoption in Poland does not fit the global vision of the company. Terms referring to religion or sexual orientation are 'taboo' in Poland and are utilized in relation to discrimination, if that takes place. Furthermore, one of the major concerns expressed by managers was the risk of generating negative feelings and attitudes toward the communications department, such as shock, misunderstanding, and even mockery. A more in-depth understanding of the nature of the possible attitudes is necessary, especially among millennials and other generations within the organisation.

The second Polish campaign, entitled: "Connect with diversity and try new ways of working for better collaborative teams" (own translation), was deployed locally during Diversity Week in 2016. The campaign incorporated visual and textual data focused on behavioural diversity (Hubbard, 2004) rather than its representative aspects. The campaign demonstrated the fundamental principles of collaborative work based on respect, listening, self-awareness, capacity to ask for advice, and non-judgmental attitude. This example reveals that communication practices are related to cultural homogeneity and integrate a more cognitive model of diversity rather than the combination of culturally diverse people.

Last but not least, we have some evidence to support the argument that the Polish subsidiary had the autonomy to develop and display heterogeneous communication content at the national and regional levels. Even though the local management implemented the Diversity and Inclusion framework, they preferred to adjust the

corporate message to local conditions and use local practices instead of global best practices.

### 5.2.  Micro level
(1)  East vs. West

It was interesting to investigate what diversity means for employees at different levels. It was argued that the divergence between the French and Polish approaches to diversity may be embodied in different management practices. Moreover, interviewees referred to diversity as something that reflects the traditional Polish values (family, church, patriotism) as opposed to the heterogeneous workforce that the term denotes in the headquarters and more broadly in the French society. They reaffirmed this difference, which highlighted a gap between 'us' and 'our way' versus 'them'.

(2)  Managerial versus operational-level perspective

It was difficult for interviewees to define what diversity means for them. This translated into hesitations and moments of silence. While managers could easily share their beliefs on diversity, people at the operational and technical level, especially those who contribute directly to the business's core activity, did not know what diversity represents and preferred to discuss other topics.

When asked about the definition of diversity, some managers were able to refer to age and gender. However, most of them highlighted the universal aspects of diversity in rather homogenous organisations. "It's great when a team is diverse, but the question is what are the aspects of diversity? It's great if there is diversity of experiences and perspectives (…). But a diverse team in terms of cultures, religion and sexual orientation, I don't think it would have value for the organisation". The interviewee suggests a positive impact of the homogenous teams ignoring the primary dimensions that make up an individual such as: nationality, culture, beliefs, disability etc.

The managers proposed to shift the focus from the differences between individuals to the invisible categories of diversity that are not the key concern of diversity management at headquarters level such as: experiences, perspectives and skills. Furthermore, the interviewees referred to the neutral concept of diversity regarding "individuality and being yourself". One manager explained:

"In my team there is a diversity of skills. On one hand I manage people with excellent analytical skills who may have problems with analysis of contracts. On other hand some of my subordinates have better skills to effectively analyse the most complex contracts but have little or no mathematical abilities. Those aspects are important when it comes to diversity".

The interviews showed also that the model of diversity based on religion and sexual orientation is not acceptable. The interviewees argue that individual differences regarding religion and sexual orientation relate to a person's private life and therefore should not be recognized in the organisational setting. Religion and sexual orientation seem to be highly inappropriate or even taboo subjects.

Also, the Anglo-Saxon term of 'inclusion', which advocates a respect-based working environment that enables everyone to thrive in the workplace seemed irrelevant for the Polish managers and employees.

In addition to this, the socio-political context is considered as a barrier to implementation of diversity management initiatives. The idea outlined above is not common and should not be considered generalizable. One of the Contract managers stated that: "Diversity is not aligned with the politics in our country. Is there any influence on the organisations? I think so. Few companies may have problems with implementing diversity" (translated verbatim).

Furthermore, it was claimed by managers that companies should consider "the lack of openness to the otherness" (translated verbatim) that can be observed in certain groups in society, especially when it comes to diversity of skin colour, religion, and sexual orientation.

In response to the question what steps are being taken to overcome the reluctance to recognize diversity, a Compliance manager pointed out that the organisational communication on diversity is necessary to change mindsets and raise better awareness on diversity issues. She also highlighted that: "there is a need to look consciously at the organisational culture, employees and the average age in the company, (…) to adapt the international standards and instil a culture of acceptance and mutual respect" (translated verbatim).

Whilst the US mainstream studies are likely to assume a pseudo international applicability of diversity initiatives, the Polish case

advocates for studying diversity management strategies with reference to the local context. It is relevant to shed light on the cultural incompatibility between the Western concept of diversity and the local approach.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to challenge the universal discourse on diversity and inclusion. Summarizing the outcomes of the exploratory study and our observations, we argue that the Polish subsidiary has its own methods of addressing diversity issues and communication practices. The case of corporate commitment to diversity cannot be extrapolated to Poland considering the fact that the diversity management is embedded in a French institutional and cultural context. This research clearly suggests that inclusion as a part of an international strategy does not have an equivalent in local organisational reality.

We propose to study diversity management from a contextual and multilevel perspective. The key areas of focus to examine further are the organisational discourse on diversity through internal communication (visual and textual representations) and the perception of diversity in employee perspective rather than narrowing the scope of the study to diversity and HR managers. Conceptual and empirical research on diversity should benefit from the local prescriptions and practices.

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