
Why are intercultural skills and their development still not considered as gamechangers in the professional world?

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural competences are gaining an increased importance in today's business environment as international, highly qualified workers close the shortage of skilled workers. It is not only necessary to train one's employees accordingly to develop a competitive advantage on the global market, but also ever-changing technology and the digital transformation require new ways of working. This paper is focusing on the importance of intercultural competence as such, as well as the connectivity between intercultural competences and trainings and the impact in real business environments. Additionally, it emphasizes the opportunities organizations could gain when investing more in intercultural competences of their employees. The research is based on literature analysis and later in-depth interviews will be conducted with companies, schools and universities in Upper Austria and in Vysočina in the Czech Republic.

1 INTRODUCTION

The scientific world already seems to be agreed on the importance of obtaining cultural competence to successfully interact in intercultural encounters, be that personal or business encounters (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2002; Lewis 2006; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010; House et al. 2004; GLOBE 2020), even in our today's digital world. Consensus about this crucial topic in in the international business world however, is still lacking rather behind (Ferraro 2002; Rohlfer and Zhang 2016).

Employees with good intercultural competence and excellent intercultural skills are becoming more and more important in our steadily changing world. Driving forces such as extensive globalization and digitalization continuously enforce this issue. Hence, intercultural skills and

competences are an important necessity in every higher educational system to reduce prejudices and boost professional empowerment of the future employees (Pinto 2018).

Therefore, projects like the Interreg project “ATCZ240 - Cross Cultural Communication Network” (CCCN) are vital to point out the importance of cross-border cooperation and intercultural competences, which in the best case are already acquired and immersed by students during the completion of their course of study.

The CCCN project conducted between Austria and the Czech Republic aims to improve the awareness about intercultural differences between the two countries by conducting in-depth interviews with two main target groups. The first target group are well established small and medium sized enterprises with a close connection to the region Upper Austria and the CZ market. In order to guarantee this close connection to the CZ market, Upper Austrian companies with subsidiaries, production sites, branch offices or sales offices in CZ are selected. In Upper Austria the project partners are conducting 10 interviews with managers at c-level e.g., owners, CEOs or other top managers on the topics of intercultural differences between Austria and the Czech Republic as well as required and important skills (e.g., intercultural competence, language skills etc.) that graduates of Universities or Fachhochschulen should have when applying at Upper Austrian companies. Similarly, the Czech partners are conducting interviews based on the same guidelines at 10 selected small and medium sized companies with headquarter in Vysočina and a close relationship to the Upper Austrian market. The output of these interviews and insights gained on the perceived importance of intercultural competence of Upper Austrian top managers should serve as a basis for further research. Within the scope of the CCCN project, also the perspective of Austrian and Czech school principals and teachers responsible for interculturality of economic secondary colleges, on intercultural competence will be investigated, as secondary schools are the second target group within the project. For this reason, in-depth interviews regarding the topics interculturality and internationalization, practice-oriented education and digitalization and digital competence are conducted. Additionally, students will be interviewed on their perspective regarding these topics.

One main reason for conducting a project between Austria and the Czech Republic are the close economic ties between the two markets. Czech Republic's GDP per Capita in 2020 was at 42.044 USD with a growth expectation of around 4.9% (OECD 2020). The growing importance of the Czech Market for Austria is also visible when looking at the most important export countries of destination for Austria. The Czech Republic, ranked at place number seven, is among the top ten export countries. Looking at the year 2020, the Austrian exports to the Czech Republic amounted 3,5% of the total export share, which is around 5 billion in EUR (Mohr 2020). As economic cooperation between these two countries is increasing, the topic of proper intercultural understanding is becoming more prevailing. Especially, because there are some significant differences in culture as well as language that must be considered when cooperating with each other (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Intercultural Competence for an increasingly International Working-Environment

Intercultural skills are becoming increasingly important in today's global business world, due to an increase in intercultural teams and networks. Many international companies are concerned with the building of teams with members from different cultures, in order to achieve a better level of collaboration and acceptance between interculturally divergent employees (Křnap and Nový 2017). Leadership is one crucial aspect when it comes to successful cooperation in culturally diverse setups. The selection of the leading persons for internationally varied teams has to be thought over deliberately (Lewis 2006). Furthermore, agility is a crucial characteristic of every international team; it is a prerequisite for success and endurance. However, not every member is uniformly comfortable and familiar with agile working environments and intensive innovation or change (Lewis 2006). Additionally, culture can affect the efficiency of virtual teamwork (e.g. remote teams), which indicates that intercultural competence is required to improve the overall performance within virtual teams especially within a steadily digitalizing business environment (Zakaria 2017).

One highly critical aspect is therefore the issue of building trust within international teams, yet difficult to conduct. Nationalities and certain habits and manners have to be considered consciously, as well as deploying basic trust building strategies (Lewis 2006). The role trust plays within successful intercultural business interactions should not be underestimated, as trust is perceived differently from country to country. While so called task-based cultures e.g. Germany or the USA are perceived to rather focus on building up business relationships by focusing on cognitive trust aspects, thus heavily relying on the other party's skills and ability, countries such as China or Brazil develop trust via strong relationships and consequently focus more on affective trust elements (Meyer 2015).

Apparently, flexible and collaborative business relationships require trust, as it clearly has an impact on the building and maintenance of good and long-lasting relationships. Trust is always built on the mutual agreement that both partners take care about the others well-being (Huang and Wilkinson 2013). The willingness to trust someone, however, can quite differ depending on the cultural background of the society the person is coming from (van Hoorn 2015).

Likewise relevant are communication challenges in business situations, which are best mastered by applying a strategic approach. It is essential that managers and international employees are becoming aware of the cultural components which influence human behaviour, and then are able to analyse the reasons for this behaviour in a methodological way (Meyer 2018). The understanding of the differences in communication depending on country and culture, are critical for every successful intercultural cooperation. Culture is so important to understand, because people who do not consider cultural aspects when communicating with people from another culture, might tend to assess the behaviour of the counterpart, through the perspective of their own culture. Consequently, certain behaviour might be interpreted wrong which can lead to severe misunderstandings (Meyer 2018).

2.2 Cultural Intelligence and Intercultural Skills

The concept of cultural intelligence can be seen as a framework for intercultural skills. Cultural intelligence can be described by obtaining three main skillsets. The first skillset, called perceptual skills, is the ability to recognize critical differences between one's own culture and the culture of the counterpart, which includes the capability of being open-minded, tolerant towards uncertainty, and being non-judgmental. The second skillset is about relational skills, mainly including being flexible, social, and empathetic to build and maintain good relationships. The third skillset, adaptive skills, is the ability to adapt social behaviour towards different cultural settings, which basically means being flexible in one's own behaviour and having extensive knowledge about other cultures (Thomas et al. 2008). Simply said, cultural intelligence refers to the professional capability of a person outside of a certain group or culture, to interpret content and gestures of the counterpart in the correct manner (Early and Mosakowski 2004).

The final result of training and improving cultural intelligence should be an increase of successful and effective intercultural encounters (Thomas et al. 2008). Improving one's cultural intelligence, hence adjusting to other cultural norms, includes coping with challenges and drawbacks. Building up confidence and recognizing learnings out of situations that were mastered successfully are important steps towards a high level of cultural intelligence (Early and Mosakowski 2004). Therefore, the CCCN project is concerned with developing training concepts for managers and executives or internationally working employees to improve cultural intelligence and create a high level of intercultural skills. Cultural intelligence and intercultural skills within this project refer to the abilities to interact and communicate successfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds within business encounters.

2.3 Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communication competence. These three concepts are very much related to each other; however, they slightly differ in their perception (Chen and Starosta 2000).

The so-called intercultural communication competence can be described as an umbrella term, which again is divided into cognitive, affective, and behavioural abilities of a person with intercultural communication competence (Chen and Starosta 2000). Intercultural awareness describes the cognitive understanding part of the concept of intercultural communication competence and refers to the understanding of different cultures that influences how people feel, think and act. Intercultural sensitivity describes the affective part of intercultural communication competence which can be defined as the motivation to value, understand and accept the differences between one's own culture and other cultures (Chen and Starosta 2000).

According to other studies (Leung, Ang and Tan 2014; Fantini 2007), intercultural competence broadly can be defined as the abilities required to behave adequately and properly while collaborating and connecting with other people who are differing from oneself, in terms of their culture and language.

Additionally, intercultural sensitivity can be understood as an improvement process in which people are developing the ability to transform on an emotional level, a cognitive level, and a

behavioural level. This process is described as a transformation from an ethnocentric view (the believe that once own culture is better than the one from other nationalities) towards an ethno-relativistic viewpoint (no one's culture is superior) (Bennett 1986). This approach of Milton J. Bennett to explain the development process of intercultural sensitivity, is based on six stages (denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaption, and integration) which a person passes during the transformation from ethnocentric towards ethno-relativistic (Bennett 1986).

Within this project and this paper, the term intercultural competence or being interculturally competent is understood as the ability to behave and act in an adequate and proper manner, knowing cultural differences and adapting one's own behaviour accordingly, while interacting with people from different cultures.

The world of research already provides several different models for assessing intercultural differences and intercultural competence (Reber, Auer-Rizzi and Maly 2004; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010; House et al. 2004; GLOBE 2020; Überwimmer and Füreder 2019), which can be used to enlarge one's own intercultural knowledge as well as finding out one's individual intercultural competence level. Regarding the Interreg Project ATCZ240, the decision was made to rely on two models, one related to intercultural competence (the MPICO model) and one focused on illustrating the differences in terms of culture between the two countries (Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions).

2.4 The MPICO Model

As a method of evaluating once own intercultural competence, the MPICO Model can be considered. The MPICO Model (Manager Process Model for Intercultural Competences) assumes that the acquisition of intercultural competencies is a life-long process. The model suggests that intercultural competent people actively prepare for situations, act in the situation, and reflect critically afterwards. These three steps can be defined as the Forethought Phase, the Performance Phase, and the Self-Reflection Phase. The model helps to evaluate one's intercultural competence, which is especially important in a continuously globalizing and digitalizing world, by answering a questionnaire of 40 questions (Überwimmer and Füreder 2019).

Using the MPICO model to determine one's intercultural competence before attending in intercultural trainings, is certainly helpful to know the starting point of one's intercultural competence. The model clearly depicts what a person already does to improve or develop intercultural competence, and the personal perspective on one's intercultural skills (Überwimmer and Füreder 2019).

The empirical part of the project will focus on the core elements of the MPICO Model. Consequently, how the managers at c-level and owners from Austrian and Czech companies prepare for specific intercultural situations, act in specific intercultural situations and finally critically reflect their behaviour afterwards.

2.5 Hofstede's Model of Cultural Dimensions

Furthermore, it is crucial to use one of the many different models given by researchers, to analyse similarities and differences between the two investigated cultures. Even though

categorizing cultures according to predefined dimensions may mislead some distinct characteristics that cannot be squeezed into a given model, it is still applicable to use cultural dimensions to compare cultures based on the same variables (Bolten 2007). For this study the decision was made to use the cultural dimensions of Hofstede’s model, to compare the two respective countries Austria and the Czech Republic. As Hofstede’s model is not free of criticism but still a good framework, additional authors e.g., Lewis or House et al. were chosen to demonstrate a second perspective in some of Hofstede’s dimensions. Hofstede’s work and development of cultural dimensions is one of the most utilized models in the scientific field. This is mostly since it provides dimensions and country indexes to measure the respective dimension in each country (Beugelsdijk, Kostova and Roth 2016). Even though, his work is not free of criticism, this project relies on his national culture framework as it enables good comparison of cultural differences on country level and provides first insights into the differences of the Austrian and Czech culture. These first insights are serving as preparation for the empirical part which aims to find out the perspective of Upper Austrian firm’s managers and owners on the importance of intercultural competence and preparation for doing business with Czech business partners.

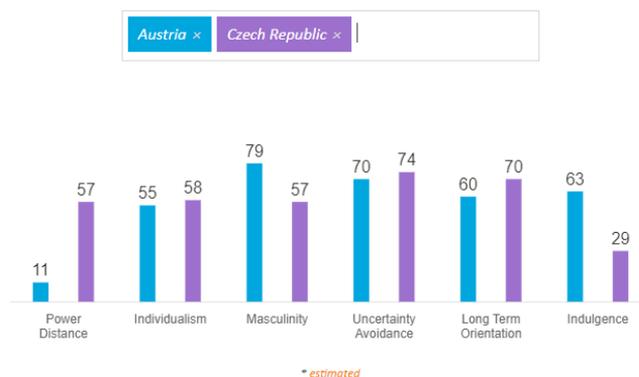


Figure 1. Cultural Dimensions of Hofstede (1984).

When looking at Hofstede’s dimensions for Austria and the Czech Republic one main differentiating variable is clearly power distance. Power distance is described as the extent to which societies accept hierarchies and different levels of power (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). House et al. define their dimension of power distance in a pretty similar way than Hofstede does. Power distance in the GLOBE study is described as the acceptance of authority and hierarchical levels within a society. Moreover, it reflects the importance or acceptance of differences in power and status symbols or privileges (House et al. 2004). According to Hofstede, Austria has a very low power distance which means the general acceptance of high hierarchical levels is rather low and flat hierarchies are preferred. Equal rights, decentralized power systems, consulting of everybody, and direct communication styles, are typical (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). In contrast to what Hofstede states about power distance in Austria, Lewis describes Austria as the exact opposite. In business the Austrian mentality according to Lewis (2006) is highly relying on hierarchy and respect for

authorities. He describes the Austrian business environment as hierarchical in which employees look up to their bosses and listen without interrupting or speaking up (Lewis 2006). The level of power distance for Austria in the Hofstede model is one main critic addressed by different authors e.g., Ly (Ly 2013).

In comparison to Austria, the Czech Republic has a rather high-power distance, which means it is a very hierarchical society, in which every member has a certain place and status. Within companies, hierarchy is important, centralization of power is common, and the employees expect to get instructions and orders (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). Moreover, Lewis describes the Czech Republic as a country that focuses on egalitarianism and democracy, meaning ensuring a liberal environment by laws and regulatory behaviour (Lewis 2006).

Furthermore, there is a distinct difference in the dimension of masculinity or femininity. Austria has a high score on masculinity which illustrates that the society is very much driven by competition, achievement, and success factors. The Czech Republic has a rather low score on masculinity, which implies that it is a less masculine society than Austria, with values such as quality of life and taking care of others being more important (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010).

The last highly differing dimension is indulgence. While Austria is an indulgent country with a rather high score, the Czech Republic has a low score which indicates that the culture is more restrained. The Czech Republic's society therefore is perceived to have a more cynical and pessimistic viewpoint. Leisure time and fulfilling one's own desires is not the number one priority. However, Austria which is a very indulgent society puts much more emphasis on fulfilling individual desires and enjoying life. Additionally, the Austrian society can be described as much more optimistic and with great focus on leisure time (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010).

Less of a difference is visible between the two countries when looking at the dimensions of long-term orientation, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance, therefore the research will concentrate on the major differences as mentioned above.

Even though Hofstede's culture model is often criticized it provides us with a useful framework for analysing different countries and cultures. As a counterpart to Hofstede, we considered some aspects of the GLOBE project initiated by House et al. In fact, the GLOBE study enhanced and built on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and developed nine dimensions, instead of the six originally proposed by Hofstede (Zainuddin et al. 2018). Indeed, the GLOBE study was conducted via a very different approach, it still follows the framework of the model proposed by Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010), which is why Hofstede's model is considered as main model for country comparison in this research project.

For the comparison of the AT/CZ intercultural differences, also the Vroom/Yetton situational leadership model could be used, as it can be seen and utilized as a model for situational intercultural competence as well (Reber, Auer-Rizzi and Malý 2004). This model applies a methodology that is close-to-action in contrast to the collection of empirical data based on questionnaires such as the studies of Hofstede and the GLOBE-Project. Reber, Auer-Rizzi and Malý (2004) collected the Czech and Austrian data prior to leadership training programs for the

Vroom/Yetton model. They concluded that Austrian managers usually do not employ autocratic strategies for decision-making, and they prefer to use group processes while the Czech managers prefer more the autocratic leadership styles.

Analysing cultural differences via the use of existing models is just the first step towards better cultural understanding. Consequently, it is extremely useful to participate in cultural trainings, to practice, get valuable insights first-hand and develop personal strategies in dealing with difficult cultural situations in business encounters.

2.6 Trainings and Development Possibilities for Intercultural Competence

Trainings for expatriates or global leaders to improve their intercultural competence already became one of the major fundamentals of any corporate training curriculum. This is extremely important as driving forces such as globalization and digitalization are growing continuously. Therefore, communicating effectively across cultural borders is becoming a fundamental ability (Szkudlarek 2009).

Communicating with strangers very often is exposing people to similar, if not the same, discomfort than when communicating with people from different cultures. Both encounters usually involve uncertainty and a certain degree of anxiety. Having successful intercultural interactions therefore very much depends on emotions and cognitive aspects involved, and not entirely on extensive cultural knowledge. However, intercultural competence is one very important part of the strategic skillset, needed to deal with complications in a global market environment (Poelzl-Hobusch and Reimerth 2017).

When it comes to the development of intercultural trainings it is essential to keep in mind that participants might react in different ways to the same training concepts. Furthermore, it is important to consider that acquiring intercultural skills is based on a certain development process. Trainers therefore need to find out the level of intercultural sensitivity or competence the participants already have and then further build on that (Bennett 1986). The initial evaluation of the participants intercultural competence can be done by a self-test such as the one proposed by the MPICO model (Überwimmer and Füreder 2019).

The world we live in today has changed towards a global community, in which intercultural encounters are not only normal but extremely important. Whether we have to communicate with people from another culture in school, university, or work, intercultural and language skills to interact successfully are vital (Ilie 2019). As a second step, intercultural trainings will be designed to improve the competences of international employees and managers from companies who are interacting with the neighbouring country (Austria, CZ), as well as from students at international schools and universities. Such intercultural trainings could involve self-checks to find out one's own intercultural behaviour and background, learning how to apply different cultural models, and interpreting cultural dimensions e.g. the very recent ones of the GLOBE 2020 project. Intercultural trainings are based on self-reflexion and the willingness to take on new behaviour manners to interact in intercultural encounters successfully. The target of the CCCN Project is to further develop the different skill sets of the defined stakeholders in order to improve the knowledge and as a consequence the behaviour of the different target groups, when interacting with international partners.

3 METHODOLOGY

In order to find out the perceived importance of intercultural competence and the actual level of intercultural intelligence and know-how within the selected companies, expert interviews in form of in-depth interviews are going to be conducted. In-depth interviews are part of a qualitative research approach and provide researchers with a rather detailed picture of a person's thoughts and insights (Creswell 2014), which is why this technique will be applied to acquire the necessary data.

The right formulation of the questions within a qualitative research approach is essential, however unfortunately often neglected. Especially during the decision about data collection, drafting the interview-guidelines, and during the conception of interpretation for the used method and chosen materials, reflexion and reformulation of questions should be one main part. This is crucial to determine the adequacy and reasonableness of the decisions made (Flick 2007).

Furthermore, a guided interview should always ensure unbiased questioning, which can be guaranteed by using different ways of asking questions. It is advisable to start the interview with unstructured questions and slowly increase the degree of structure within the questions to avoid biased answers influenced by the interviewer (Flick 2007). Moreover, keeping interview guidelines as flexible as possible would be wise (Flick 2007).

For the interviews with the companies, an interview-guideline was developed together by both partners. This guideline will serve as a basis for all interviews in both countries and focuses on two distinct topics. The first part includes the topic of intercultural aspects and how companies deal with intercultural difficult situations, and the second part deals with the topic of FH and University graduates within the companies.

Within the framework of the Interreg Project Cross Cultural Communication Network, ten selected companies as well as four high schools and one university in both countries (Austria and the Czech Republic) will be interviewed. Both project partners chose companies and schools within their region, namely Upper Austria and Vysočina. Moreover, Upper Austrian companies with a subsidiary, production site or other close connection to the region Vysočina will be preferred. The selection process of the companies is based on a list of around 38 possible companies in Upper Austria that have a connection to the Czech Republic. Out of this list a convenience sample will be drawn.

Convenient sampling is one of the non-probability sampling methods, which can be described as methods in which the researcher does not ensure that every member within a population gets the chance to participate. Non-probability sampling methods are typically methods in which the participants for the study are directly chosen by the researchers (Stratton 2021).

A convenient sample can be defined as selecting participants for a study that are available fast and effortless (Taherdoost 2016). Thus, participants are chosen by the researchers based on availability and accessibility. Very often convenience sampling is used due to its low costs, the reduced amount of time needed to set up the sample, and its simplicity (Stratton 2021).

As the conducting of interviews with representatives of secondary schools is also part of this project, the selection of the four interviewed schools is based on their level of interculturality and their location in Upper Austria. The schools have to be high-schools that finish with a

graduation level of A-levels. After collecting a list of 14 possible schools, the most international schools were chosen to be interviewed. International schools in this case are defined as schools that either have the status of an international school and therefore are following the principle of the International Baccalaureate (IB program), or schools with international majors, English as a course-language, or the possibility of exchange semesters/internships abroad. Additionally, schools with a connection to the Czech Republic for instance via close cooperation in projects or exchange programs are preferred.

For the interviews with the selected schools and the one university, which was decided to be the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria in Steyr, interview-guidelines were created in cooperation with the Czech partners. The interview-guidelines serve as a basis for all interviews in both countries and include the topics of intercultural intelligence and skills as well as intercultural competence and sensitivity.

4 FUTURE OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSIONS

The research done in this project is not yet completed, and the next logical step is therefore to make use of the collected data and build upon the theoretical framework. The final results and data will help to develop meaningful and helpful training concepts for executives as well as students, to improve their intercultural skills. Additionally, the goal is to develop “train the trainer” concepts and prepare trainers accordingly to manage all the challenges that might occur within such trainings. Further research and development of how to point out the importance of intercultural trainings, to train and build up intercultural competent employees, should be of utmost interest for any company and business corporation.

The aim of this paper was to give a theoretical overview about the topic of intercultural competence and trainings as well as introducing the CCCN research project. Pointing out the importance of this topic is a crucial part of this paper as there is still little to no acceptance in the practical area and business environment. The next step of this research will be the conducting of the interviews and collecting as well as analysing the data. The results and findings of the interviews conducted within this project, as well as managerial implications based on them, will be presented within the next paper.

The concept of culture and intercultural competence is a very broad and diffuse topic, which requires clarification and training, to be successful. In our today's global and interconnected business world, intercultural competence has become a major skillset required for many positions and jobs.

Cultural competence is not just a theoretical framework, heavily researched in the world of academia, but a highly critical skillset for employees, students, and private people. So, what if cultural trainings would become a normal part of every curriculum starting in high schools and continuing throughout higher educational systems e.g., universities, and business life?

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