

Assessing the development of intercultural sensitivity in business settings: how to interact successfully with people belonging to another nation



“Attitude is determined by culture of a nation and it is known the impact of culture is enormous on economic life including behavior, values and norms within an organization.”^[2]

With globalisation, many non-native English speakers do business in changeable and culturally diverse settings. The ability to communicate across cultures and understand diverse perspectives is a necessity in order to achieve a competitive advantage in our global economy.

The research to be discussed in the paper is a part of a complex research conducted in 2013-2014, in Hungary. The paper focuses on demonstrating how culture influences behaviour in international settings where business partners have differing values, attitudes and norms. More than 200 Hungarian managers and professionals were asked to answer close-ended and open-ended questions making choices among a set of alternatives focusing on their attitudes in several business situations.

The data was collected with the aid of a research questionnaire and entered into the SPSS programme, then analysed using appropriate statistical methods. The findings reveal that companies seem to find it difficult to adapt their messages to suit different cultural groups but there are new approaches with promise the most success for communicating and working effectively in international business settings.

INTRODUCTION

In the globalising world, more managers and professionals are required to interact with individuals from other cultures, make and maintain intercultural connections, work in culturally mixed environments, and perform tasks with

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[2] Fukuyama, F. (1995): *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. Free Press, New York.

counterparts in different countries that require intercultural skills involving understanding and sensitivity to different cultural perspectives.^[3]

Intercultural communication, as in many scholarly fields, is a combination of many other fields. These fields include anthropology, cultural studies, psychology and communication. The field has also moved both toward the treatment of interethnic business relations, and toward the study of behavioural patterns during intern and extern communication. Intercultural communication occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture for consumption by a member of another culture.

Companies that work in multicultural environments face several challenges in their everyday business life. Hofstede's advice has to be taken into consideration to approach the characteristics of working in multicultural business setting: "*The principle of surviving in a multicultural world is that one does not think, feel, and act in the same way in order to agree on practical issues and to cooperate*".^[4]

Communicative behaviour is believed to be strongly influenced by cultural value systems.^[5] Samovar and Porter claim that "*in the study of human interaction, it is important to look at cultural values, but in the study of intercultural communication it is crucial*".^[6]

In this paper we focus on the behavioural aspect of working in multicultural business environments. The term multicultural is adopted here to highlight the multilayered nature of the situations in which communication takes place. As stated by Louhiala-Salminen "*in multicultural situations, the various cultures of the interactants interact with and influence encounters, which, in turn, influence the nature of discourse*".^[7]

We test the hypothesis that companies that work in multicultural environments are subject to communication barriers due to different cultural backgrounds. Different cultures have differing values, perceptions and philosophies. As a result, certain ideas may have very different connotations for people having different cultural backgrounds. It has been proven that it is essential to behave efficiently with people coming from different social backgrounds, regarding both verbal or non-verbal interactions.

[3] Brannen, M. Y. - Garcia, D. - David, C. T. (2009): *Biculturals as Natural Bridges for Intercultural Communication and Collaboration. IWIC'09*. (2) Paolo Alto, California, USA.

[4] Hofstede, G. (1991): *Culture's Consequences, Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

[5] FitzGerald, H. (2003): *How Different are We? Spoken Discourse in Intercultural Communication*. Multilingual Matters Ltd., Clevedon.

[6] Samovar, L. A. - Porter, R. E. (1991): *Communication between Cultures*. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.

[7] Louhiala-Salminen, L. - Charles, M. - Kankaanranta, A. (2005): *English as a Lingua Franca in Nordic Corporate Mergers*. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(4). 401-421.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Intercultural business communication is not a new field. Its founders, Hall,^[8] Hofstede^[9] and Trompenaars^[10] established a framework for approaching different cultures, and developed concepts (among others) such as high and low context cultures, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, ascription versus achievement. Then, most of the researchers have taken full advantage of methodologies developed during the past 50-60 years to do their research in a sophisticated way.^[11]

Culture and cultural issues now seem to have several implications for economists, investors, practical managers, researchers and for everyone who works in a multicultural context.^[12] Considerable debate still exists among researchers as to the best assessment criteria regarding culture in multicultural context and it is obvious that the word *culture* often brings up more problems than it solves.^[13]

It is frequently pointed out that one's intercultural communication competence is context-dependent. A big difference in how communication is carried out in business contexts as opposed to other contexts is that "*business people need practical immediately applicable business tools that will help them solve business communication problems*".^[14] In other words, no matter how much knowledge of intercultural communication you have, the knowledge will not be meaningful unless you can utilize it in actual interactions. Also, even if you can analyse problems, you have no chance of succeeding in the business world unless you can find solutions to problems. Therefore, the focus of intercultural communication in business should be on helping people find solutions; that is, utilizing a "*process of co-constructing 'better' (rather than right, wrong, good, bad)*".^[15]

[8] Hall, E. T. (1959): *The Silent Language*. Doubleday, New York; Hall, E. T. (1997): *Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*. Nicholas Brealy Publishing, London.

[9] Hofstede, G. (1980): *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

[10] Trompenaars, F. (1993): *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*. Economist Books, London.

[11] See: House, R. J. - Hanges, P. J. - Javidan, M. - Dorfman, P. W. - Gupta, V. (eds.) (2004): *Culture, Leadership and Organizations. The Globe Study of 62 Societies*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

[12] See: Geertz, C. (1973): *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, New York; Schein, E. H. (1991): What is Culture? In: Frost, P. J. - Moore, L. F. - Reis Louis, M. C. - Lundberg, C. - Martin, J. (eds.): *Reframing Organizational Culture*. Sage, NewburyPark, CA. 243-253.; Hall, E. T. - Hall, M. R. (1990): *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME; Gudykynst, W. B. (2004): *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication*. Sage, London.

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[15] Jackson, P. Z. - McKergow, M. (2002): *The Solution Focus*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

A large number of researchers have looked at cultural variables that affect intercultural business, the emphasis is typically not on the intercultural business communication process or linguistic issues but instead on cultural attitudes^[16].

During the planning phase of the investigation the author of the present paper considered the experiences and findings of the GLOBE research,^[17] as well as the findings of the examinations which were carried out by members of the Department of International Communication during the past 10 years.^[18]

Other investigations and results have been studied, qualitative and qualitative approaches have been considered for formulating our approach to the topic in question.^[19] Hofstede's latest approach is closer to this paper, as it also builds on the fact "that the world around us is changing does not need to affect the usefulness of the dimensional paradigm; on the contrary, the paradigm can help us understand the internal logic and the implications of the changes."^[20]

The author of this paper believes that Quills's model^[21] need to be considered who argues that cultural differences ought to be viewed as opportunities

[16] Haire, M. E. - Ghiselli, E. - Porter, L. W. (1963): *Cultural Patterns in the Role of the Manager*. Industrial Relations, 2(2). 95-117.; Laurent, A. (1983): *The Cultural Diversity of Western Conceptions of Management*. International Studies of Management and Organization, 13(1-2). 75-96.; Trompenaars, F. - Wooliams, P. (2003): *Business across Cultures*. Capstone, Chichester; Konczosné Szombathelyi, M. (2013): *Reciprocal effects between regions and organizations. A study of European regional cultures and corporate embeddedness*. Tér - Gazdaság - Ember, 1(3) 42-53.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2014): *A regionális és a vállalati kultúra kölcsönhatásának vizsgálata*. Tér és Társadalom, 28(1). 84-98.; Tompos, A. (2014): Hungarian societal values through business negotiators' practices. In: Rotschedl, Jiri - Cermakova, Klara (eds.): *Proceedings of the 14th International Academic Conference*. International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences, Prague. 445-453.

[17] Bakacsi, Gy. (2012): *A Globe-kutatás kultúráváltozóinak vizsgálata faktoranalízis segítségével*. Vezetéstudomány, 43(4). 12-22.; House, R. J. - Hanges, P. J. - Javidan, M. - Dorfman, P. W. - Gupta, V. (eds.) (2004): *Culture, Leadership and Organizations. The Globe Study of 62 Societies*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

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[19] Santoro, M. (2008): *Culture As (and After) Production*. Cultural Sociology, 2(1). 7-31.; Cohen, A. (2007): *One Nation, Many Cultures*. Cross-cultural research, 41(3). 273-300.; Derkun, C. A. - Rayuskaya, T. O. - Kresova, N. S. (2010): *Cross-cultural Communication*. European researcher, 10. 74-77.; Derkun, C. A. - Rayuskaya, T. O. - Kresova, N. S. (2010): *Cross-cultural Communication*. European researcher, 10. 74-77.; Du-Babcock, B. (2013): *English as Business Lingua Franca: A Comparative Analysis of Communication Behavior and Strategies in Asian and European Contexts*. Iberica, 26. 99-130.

[20] Hofstede, G. (2011): *Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context*. Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1). Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>. Accessed: 12 Sept. 2014.

[21] Quill, S. E. (2000): *Attaining Cultural Synergy in Global Mergers*. Intercultural Management Quarterly, 1(1). 39-57.

to achieve synergy and to enhance effectiveness, not as obstacles to overcome. To create a synergistic organisation, that values and uses difference, management must employ an intercultural communication framework and develop an organisational intercultural competency. Therefore, it is clear that „*every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems which reveal themselves as dilemmas*”^[22]

AIM, METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The results of this paper are part of a wider research which was conducted in 2013–2014 in Hungary. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate the results of the survey and to focus on demonstrating how culture influences the behaviour of Hungarian professionals in an international setting. The use of a questionnaire was chosen as research tool because it is believed that this type of examination gives relevant information about the behaviour, values, norms and attitudes of people who are in business contact with partners with different cultural backgrounds.

The data collection was carried out with the aid of a research questionnaire which had four parts:

- language use in internal and external communication
- miscommunication resulting from cultural differences
- culture-affected characteristics of conflict management, decision-making, internal and external behaviour
- the use of negotiation tactics and their contextual/situational variables.

This paper deals with the third part of the research: i.e. it focuses on the behavioural differences due to different cultures. The sample consisted of 265 respondents but after examining the responses, the final sample contains 250 respondents. 15 questionnaires did not meet the criteria which required that the companies should be situated in a certain geographical area, i.e. in the West-Transdanubian Region.

Formulating the research questions we agree with the traditional notion which was exemplified by Scollon and Scollon (2001) who explain how individuals from different cultural groups communicate differently as a consequence of their different worldviews and norms of behaviour.

Considering the complex and delicate nature of the subject we tried to put together such an outline of the questionnaire which would offer us the most accurate answers to the following questions:

- cultural differences affect several aspects of internal and external organisational communication:

[22] Hall, E. T. (1997): *Riding the Waves of Culture. Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*. Nicholas Brealy Publishing, London. 8.

- working style is different or not if you work with foreigners
- decision-making depends on culture
- problem-solving is (not) influenced by culture
- the ideal manager is (not) socially and culturally sensitive
- competition is the supreme value at any successful company.

RESPONDENTS AND SAMPLING

The quota sampling was chosen as the most relevant sampling technique wherein the sample has the same rates of individuals as the population regarding certain features like the age. In this case, the quotas were the proportions of economic sectors on an assigned territorial area according to the data of the Hungarian Statistical Office. The Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample and the base of the quotas.

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

Sectors	West Transdanubian Region (HSO, 2011, %)	Sample of research (2013, %)
Services	75,70%	68%
Industry	8,40%	25,20%
Agriculture	4,60%	3,20%
		No data: 3,6%

Source: compilation of the author based on the data of Hungarian Statistical Office (2011).

- 125 male and 114 female responded on the questions of the survey, and they are mostly in the age group between 20 and 35 (62.8%).
- The companies and/or the enterprises where these respondents work are located in cities with county rights (N=155).
- 32.8% of companies can be founded in other towns within the Region.
- Most of the companies (54.8%) are big companies, having more than 250 employees and the rest are small- and medium-sized enterprises (43.2% altogether).
- Many companies in the sample are foreign-owned (56%), the proportion of Hungarian enterprises is 34%, and the other 8% are joint ventures. This information can be supported by the fact that this region is in close geographical proximity to Austria and Germany and this region is the home for many companies coming from these states and cultures.
- 93.6% of the respondents work together with foreigners in their workplace but according to the type of cultures and nations, the picture is very varied. The

most relevant business partners/contacts are from German speaking countries (n=99) but there are also many respondents who are in contact with partners from English speaking countries (n=70). The proportion of Chinese is also very high (n=17) and also the neighbouring countries' cultures have quite high rates, for example Serbian or Slovak.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of attitude statements

The third part of the questionnaire contains attitude statements related to work in multicultural business settings. The respondents should give an evaluation - to what extent they agree or disagree with the listed attitude statements (see: Appendix). The Likert-scale was used to evaluate the statements but in the normal way. The lowest value of the scale was 0 with the meaning 'totally do not agree' and the highest value was 4 with the meaning 'totally agree'.

Taking a look at the respondents' answers, the majority of them agree the most with two statements - "*It is a good place to work when information continuously flows between the bosses and the staff.*" and "*I like feeling well at my workplace*". (In both cases, the mean of the statements is 3.62). The appropriate working atmosphere is an essential factor for Hungarian respondents who largely agree with this statement. However, they point out that not only is the atmosphere at work is important but it is also relevant that the flow of information should always be guaranteed in the hierarchy. Related to the strategy and the future of business, the respondents hold it a significant factor that the "*When making decisions, long-term goals need to be always considered*".

It was assumed by the author that there are some differences between the age groups of respondents in how they agree with these statements. According to the cross tabulation analysis, there is only one relation between the attitude statements and the age of the respondents. People between the age of 20 and 50 rather agree with the statement that "*I have to think differently when I work with a foreigner*" but according to the majority of respondents above the age 51, it is not a typical feature of them. Since the value of Chi-square test is 23.579 and the significance ($p=0.003$) is less than the 0.05 value, the hypotheses can be accepted that there is relation between the two variables.

Factor analysis

Since the Bartlett's test of sphericity value is 913.335 and the significance is 0.000, and since the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy shows quite high values (0.669), the factor analysis is suitable. The Eigenvalues calculation shows how many factors could be established from the 22 studied variables: in this case the number is 8 factors. The Table 2 shows the factors and their variances.

Table 2: Factor analysis

Component	Initial Eigenvalues		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3,266	14,846	14,846
2	2,538	11,536	26,382
3	1,528	6,945	33,327
4	1,294	5,882	39,209
5	1,283	5,830	45,039
6	1,214	5,517	50,556
7	1,091	4,960	55,516
8	1,035	4,704	60,220
9	,926	4,207	64,427
10	,919	4,179	68,607
11	,857	3,894	72,500
12	,774	3,519	76,019
13	,733	3,332	79,351
14	,661	3,006	82,357
15	,617	2,805	85,163
16	,566	2,573	87,735
17	,545	2,475	90,211
18	,503	2,287	92,498
19	,493	2,243	94,740
20	,422	1,916	96,657
21	,420	1,908	98,565
22	,316	1,435	100,000

Using Varimax analysis as a tool, the number of variables with high factor weight can be minimized thus the interpretation of factors can be facilitated. It will help to decide the relation between the attitude statements and factors.

Factor 1: Individualism vs. collectivism

- a. *The manager is the key figure in making decisions.*
- b. *I like feeling well at my workplace.*
- c. *I like being rewarded for solving problems on my own.*
- d. *I prefer collective decision-making.*
- e. *In a good workplace there is constant information flow between superiors and subordinates.*

Factor 2: Concept of culture

- a. *I have to think differently when I work with a foreigner.*
- b. *I have to adapt to the foreign working culture for cooperation to be successful.*

Factor 3: Uncertainty avoidance

- a. *It is better to work for a company which does not take big risks.*
- b. *I expect rules to limit the power of superiors.*
- c. *When making decisions, long-term goals need to be always considered.*

Factor 4: Masculinity vs. femininity

- a. *The ideal manager is socially sensitive.*
- b. *It is important that the management accepts the employees' innovative ideas*

Factor 5: Universalism vs. particularism

- a. *Rules hinder effective work.*
- b. *I have better results when working together with friends.*
- c. *Conflicts at work should be solved by the manager.*
- d. *I like my superior holding meetings every week at the same time.*

Factor 6. Power distance

- a. *Management decisions depend on the interests of the company rather than personal relationships.*
- b. *Incentives need to be differentiated.*

Factor 7: Diffuse vs. specific

- a. *I expect my superior to consider my position when evaluating my performance.*
- b. *I expect my close colleagues to appreciate my results.*

Factor 8: Masculinity vs. femininity

- a. *The gender of my superior does not affect my behaviour.*
- b. *It disturbs me if my superior speaks to me on too familiar terms.*

Another field of analyses based on the current research might be the cluster analyses, i.e. the data obtained can be used to see whether Hungarian manager and professionals belong to the same dimensions as it was thought some decades ago.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The interest in the study of intercultural communication has grown tremendously during the past several years and research on intercultural communication which treats culture and interculturality as a given fact from which analyses should begin is increasingly being questioned.

Organisations have to satisfy many demands and prerequisites to make an operable system which can support management and which can realize business success. The question of cultural differences can be approached in a number of different ways. The most common one is to adopt one partner's culture as dominant. The other alternative is to separate or limit the activities of the partners so as to minimise cultural interaction and hence the likelihood of cultural clashes.

The present paper is only one of the approaches to view and analyse intercultural communication but it is the approach which is important from the individuals' and the enterprises' perspectives. This paper argues for a reevaluation of how we approach the topic of intercultural communication and for the greater emphasis on successful corporate communication as the goal of better understanding in and out of organisations.

The multicultural makeup of organisations is one of the main causes of the communication breakdowns that today's organisations are experiencing. And these communication failures can be an obstacle in fulfilling corporate goals.

The respondents highlighted that in the 21st century globally employable professionals are needed who do possess intercultural empathy. This is already an urgent need in the business world where multicultural encounters have become a common practice.

Further research in this field, focusing on different organisations and cultures, would also be beneficial, as it could provide additional valuable assistance to organisations wishing to participate in international business.

The current research might have a long-term impact by allowing future researchers to draw upon an enlarged knowledge base and for academics and business practitioners to develop and implement programmes that facilitate international and intercultural communication. Therefore, the findings might be used by academics in university settings to design courses and to develop teaching materials that relate to the real world needs of international business actors.

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HUNGARIAN SUMMARY

Napjainkban üzleti-gazdasági kapcsolataink során kulcsfontosságú saját kultúránk megismerése mellett más kultúrák ismerete és megértése a sikeres együttműködés érdekében. A tanulmány célja egy 2013–2014-ben végzett kvantitatív kutatás bemutatása volt, és az eredmények ismeretében ismételt bizonyítást nyert, hogy a különböző kultúrákhoz tartozó szakemberek viselkedési normái, értékrendszere és attitűdjei hatással vannak a vállalati extern és intern kommunikációra, a döntéshozatali folyamatra, a konfliktuskezelésre, s nem utolsósorban az üzleti partnerek közérzetére az együttműködés során. A tanulmány az immár klasszikusnak tartott kultúrakutatók modelljei mellett a Széchenyi István Egyetemen végzett kultúrakutásokat is megemlíti a szakirodalmi áttekintésben, majd a kutatás célja, módszere, a kutatási kérdések, illetve a minta és az adatközlők bemutatása után tárgyalja a kutatás eredményeit. A több, mint 250 magyar adatközlő cége a Nyugat-dunántúli régióban van, napi rendszerességgel munkakapcsolatban vannak külföldiekkel és 22 kulturális különbségekre fókuszáló attitűd-állítás alapján nyilatkoztak az interkulturális menedzsment témakörébe tartozó kérdésekre. Az eredmények bebizonyították, hogy az ismert nemzetközi kultúraközi menedzsmentkutatások által feltárt magyar nemzeti kultúra-jellemzők (maszkulin, individualista, bizonytalanságkerülő, partikularista) még mindig érvényesek, s a magyar munkavállaló számára fontos, hogy jól érezze magát a munkahelyén, amibe beletartozik a megfelelő belső kommunikáció is. Új tényezőként jelent meg a jövőorientáltság, amely az eddigi kutatásokban nem volt releváns a magyar kultúra vonatkozásában.



Herm of Saint Ladislaus in Basilica of Győr (King of Hungary
from 1077 to 1095, born 1045)