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A LOOK AT CULTURAL BARRIERS | Empirical study

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Abstract

Nowadays the global market allows each individual to work in foreign countries. This fact is a great opportunity for business development, but also puts into light the problem of cultural barriers. Ineffective cross-cultural communication and collaboration can harm employees, customers, and other stakeholders. A company with employees from different cultures must acknowledge and understand these barriers in order to overcome them and to obtain the desired performance. The present study aims to expose the cultural barriers encountered by foreigners in a multinational company from Romania.

Introduction

Communication, as seen from a first glance at contemporary society, has become a necessity that we cannot miss. Its lack would throw the world into chaos and darkness of evil, hatred and ignorance. Therefore, the way it evolves has become very important, politically being known as diplomacy, while in other plans still remaining communication.

A good communication leads to a good collaboration between two individuals and in the majority of cases it leads to a good outcome, valuable to an organization in which employees interact daily in order to perform their tasks.

Nowadays society tries to remove all barriers that prevent proper communication by creating bridges between the various barriers more or less justifiable that separates the world. In this respect, means of communication are studied in schools, papers are written in order to elucidate the communication "mysteries" and the church is fighting hard to combat discrimination, which is a hindrance to true communication.

Effective communication with people of different cultures is particularly difficult. Cultures offer individuals ways of thinking - ways to see, to hear and interpret the world. The same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they speak the "same" language. For example, when languages are different and the translation should be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstanding increases.

There are several cultural factors that can induce cultural barriers, which are the most perceived at the level of communication, because communication is the base for any relation, either is a business one or a personal one. Therefore it is important for any company to acknowledge the cultural barriers that foreign employees encounter at work place when they are working in a different country than the one they were born in.In the present study the focus will be on the foreign employees from Romania.

Culture and communication

Comminucation misunderstandings can appear even when it is not the case of different cultures because each individual, as Hofsede mentions in his researches (2001, 2005, 2010), has its own way of thinking, feeling and acting.

Basically cultural differences may appear between members of same nationality, because they are different at other cultural levels. The levels identified by Hofstede (1996) are: "national level, regional and/ or ethnic and/ or religious and/ or linguistic affiliation level, gender level, generation level,level of social class and the organizational level."

Taking into account Hofstede's cultural levels, Onea (2012) describes in herresearch how each can induce barriers in the way of communication. The level of national culture has the highest influence on individuals and in a multicultural environment raises the most problems to communication and collaboration, because of the language differences, dimentions of cultural specificity or oreintation of sociatal values. „The bigger the differences betweenvalues of individuals' national cultures, the more likely to occur misunderstandings in the organizational communication" (Onea, 2012, 124).

The regional culture usually tends to transform itself into a barrier for organizational communication, mainly because stereotypes are created based on it. Ethincity, linguistic affiliation, religion, gender, generation, social class and organizational culture are other sources of cultural barriers mentioned by Onea (2012).

"Linguistic affiliation can generate differences at the level of idiom (the posibility of using a language), language (the set of sings used by a community) and speech (a speaker's formulation in a particular language)" (Saussure, 1998). These differences can further lead to cultural barriers. Language is linked to an individual's identity (Lauring, 2008) and therefore these barriers may influence various aspects of human relationships, due to the fact that language is the mediator that allows individuals to relate and understand each other (Imberti, 2007).

Another aspect which needs to be mentioned as a potential fuel for the cultural barriers is religion. Religion has a great impact on individuals because it consolidates their values, costumes and traditions. Thery (2002) expozes in his research the differences between the features of monotheism cultures and samsaic cultures (Buddhism and Hinduism). In monotheism the person matters and the individual responsability is high, while in Buddism and Hinduism the familly matters and the personal responsability is at a lower level. Also for a monotheist time is very important and valuable, while for a buddist or hindu time does not matter. Therefore, problems at the level of communication and collaboration may occur in these areas.

Stella Ting-Toomey (1999) mentiones three ways in which culture can interfere with effective cross-cultural understanding: „cognitive constraints", „behaviour constraints" and „emotional constraints". Each individual has a reference frame with which he compares or in which he inserts all the new information from a new culture. Each culture has a set of behaviour rules when it comes to communication (for exmeple how close inndividuals sit when they talk to each other, if they look directly in each others

eyes or if they say straight, without detours, what they think). Ting Thoomey's third factor refers to the fact that in some cultures individuals express their emotion freely when they communicate (they show fear, anger, frustration, they smile or yell), while in other cultures this emotions are hidden and only the „rational" ones are shown. If the people involved in the communication process are not aware of these facts and they do not try to overcome them then it is more likely to develop a comunication malfunction.

It is well known that in this century the American workplace is probably the most culturally diverse one and therefore a glance at it may help in the present study. Chris Blank, an independent writer and research consultant, mentions the following cultural barriers encounter in the american organizations: verbal and language, nonverbal communication and personal space, generational, status and resistance. "Thus, workers who speak with a strong accent may find their colleagues have difficulty understanding them, people from Latin cultures maintain less personal space than many American, German or Japanese individuals find comfortable to maintain, older workers are describing younger workers as "slackers" and younger workers are criticizing older workers as being "out of touch.""

Communication can be defined as the attempt of an individual to let another one know what he meant and does not necessarily result in understanding. When the people that are communicating come from different cultures misunderstandingsmay appear, caused by misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation, because two national groups do not see the world exactly in the same way (Adler, 1991). Based on culture, a national group has its own perception, which is selective, learned and culturally determined. Perception tends to remain constant and leads to a kind of interpretation which guids each individual to a kind of behaviour. Perceptions may also lead to the creation of stereotypes. For exemple individuals from different cultures see the American citizens in different ways. Japenese people see americans as rude, nationalistic and self-indulgent, while French people see them as decisive, friendly and industrious (Adler, 1991).

Learning about cultural differences in customs and beliefs helps building cross-cultural communication and effective collaboration. By studying cultural traditions, norms, practices, values and learning styles of the countries they are new in, individuals are more prepared to effectively deliver services and connect with culturallydifferent individuals on a deeper level. „It is important to keep in mind that everyone isunique in his or her own way, so cultural norms should be viewed as guidelines, not asabsolutes" (Guion,

Walker & Diehl, 2005, p. 1). This awareness will serve to improve cross-cultural communication, rather than to stereotype individuals or communities.

Research methodology

In order to identify the cultural barriers with which foreigners confronts in Romania at their work place we used as a research instrument the interview. Ten foreign employees from a multinational company from Romania were interviewed. All interviewes took place inside the company, in different meeting rooms and were recorded with the agreement of the paticipants. Before the interview each respondent received an interview guide (Annex 1).

The subjects have ages between 26 and 39 years old, they have Masters Degree and different specialization and they work in different departments in the company. Two of them are female and the rest are male and they come from different countries. One respondent is from Mexic, one from Peru, one from Germany, two from Hungary and the rest of five are from India.

The interview touches issues such as ownculture, perceiving differences between cultures, which cultural factors lead to cultural barriers, dealing with missunderstandings and stereotypes, organization's sensitivity to cultural aspects and ways of reducing the effects of cultural barriers on communication and collaboration.

Resultsand discussion

At the beginning of the interview each individual was asked if the company prepered them for working in Romania, respectively if they have benefited from courses or workshops regarding Romania and romaninan culture. We were surprised to find out that neither of them had the opportunity to be involved by the company in such actions, but four of them have previously worked with romanians in the virtual environment, through calls, emails or internal network chat talks. Despite this fact all of them have recognized that some cultural courses and workshops with a native placed in the work environment would have helped them not only at work place, but also in their personal life, given the fact that they currently live in Romania.

Regarding research about the new country in which they were going to work, six of them (the ones from India and Mexic) have addmited that before accepting the offer to work here, have searched on Internet information about the country, regarding geographical coordinates, climate, culture, religion, population, language, costumes, traditions and work environment. The three ones, which are from Europe (Germany and Hungary), stated that they knew from the media and from the romanian friends enough information so that a

research was not necessary. The employee from Peru has a romanin husband and she is quite familiar with the culture, values and costumes of romanian people. She stated „Romania is like a second home for me and I identify myself with some of its cultural aspects, eventhough my culture is quite different".

One person from India said that he was so curious about Romania that he wanted to know how romanin language sounds. So, he searched on the internet some clips in which romanians are talking.

Moving forward to the cultural differences, all of the respondents stated nationality, language, religion, customs, habbits, ways of interracting, especially with their direct superior, nonverbal language, values and style of dressing. When we asked them to describe how they see romanin employees the respondends said friendly, communicative, hard working serious in terms of work, with a great sense of humor, but too stressed at work and some times because of that they lose patience.

When it comes to naming which are the cultural barriers that affect the most their comunication and collaboration with romaninans indian individuals mentioned language, nonverbal communication, values and „how emotional they get when they talk" (an answer of an employee from India) while the rest mentioned behavioural rules and „cognitive constraints". Four of the employees from India, have addmited that eventhough the common toungue at workplace is English, sometimes because of their accent, the message is not very well perceived, and sometimes they are misunderstood. This reflects in their day to day job, because more time is needed in order to make themselves clear and some romanian employees lose their patiance, because „romanins consider time very valuable, while in India time is not that important compared to completely understanding the task and why it needs to be done in a specific way".

Indian respondents stated that they do not know always what to say and how to say in order to provide a clear message. Also, three of the surveyed indians said they were a little inconfortable by the distance that romaninas hold when they talk face to face and also by the fact that sometimes romanians feel the need to make physical contact, like beat shoulders or the touch of the arm or forearm when they want to consolate or encourage them. In their culture this kind of gestures are normal only between very closed relations. All of the indian employees said that romanians are very passionate when they debate a problem or when they have a discussion in contradictory. All of them said that at the beginning, when they had such a conversation, they thought they have said something that upseted the romanian employee with whom they were talking. Also one respondent stated that while working on a project with several romanians at a moment they were pressured by the deadline and in the team there were several opinions on how to finish the project and a contradictory discussion started between two of the romanian members. He had the impression that they were fighting and he told them to stop fighting. The romanins looked at him and said whyle they were smiling that they are not fighting, they are only debating the problem. He said „in India we do not show such emotion in the work environment".

Regarding stereotypes, the employees from Hungary and Germany addimted that they had a wrong impression of romanians, mainly because of the negative media promoted on our continent regarding romanians and that they were pleasantly surprised to see that the negative aspects are not how they thought. At the beginning they were a little reticent regarding working with romanians, but now all the worries have disappeared because they encountered here friendly people, willing to share their knowledge and to help them when it is needed.

Despite these aspects, the respondents from Hungary and India said that they are stereotyped by the romanian employees and sometimes they feel like they are excluded in some discussions. The indian employees said that they have the impression that romanians think that they are „slow learners and not quite intelligent" and also that they sense a superiority tone when they are talking to some of the romanian employees. The hungarian respondents also felt at the beginning a little tension between them and romanian employees in some conversations, mainly because of the political situation of the hungarian minority from Romania.

When it comes to cultural sensitivity at the company level, the foreign employees think that the organizational culture helps them in integrating in the new work environment and feel the support of their direct manager, mainly through their orientation towards equity despite country of origin and culture. As ways of diminuating the effects of cultural barriers on communication and collaboration foreign employees mentioned cultural courses and workshops,languagecourses, teambuildings but also „tematic days" in which a part of cultural aspects from one country should be presented, until all cultural aspects from all countries are covered.

Conclusions

Nowadays we work in an envirmonment in which different cultures come togheter and individuals are facing cultural barriers in the way of their communication and collaboration. If not

treated seriouslly, verbal and language barriers can produce confusions in the work place.

It is imperative to know and understand the differences between cultures and how to approach them in order for individuals from different cultures to work togheter as a group.

Each person has a self perception on facts and based on it has a self behavioural conduct, because perceptions and behavioural patterns are forged through the assimilated culture during life experiences. Given the fact that other cultures are compared to self culture, the tendency of a person is to filter the facts through its own cultural conditioning.

Therefore all employees should show respect and should try to empathize with persons of different cultures. It would be very helpful for culturaly diverse employees to benefit from cultural courses and workshops in order to understand and to communicate easily with their coworkers different from them in terms of culture. These measures may conduct to an intercultural communication, which refers to the effective communication between people of different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, to break down cultural barriers, first of all employees must be aware of it and should aknowledge it and secondly companies should offer proper methods to help its employees develop in such a diverse environment so that they can be at their highest level of performance, without being affected by the cultural barriers.

Acknowledgement

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Annex 1

Interview guide

- Cultural research, courses and workshops
- Cultural differences interms of nationality, language, religion, costumes, values and interaction
- Which of the mentioned differences are affecting the communication and collaboration with romanian employees
- Language barriers and stereotypes
- Organization's and employess' sensitivity to cultural aspects
- Ways of diminuating the effects of cultural barriers on communication and collaboration