INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Monica CONDRUZ-BĂCESCU
Academia de Studii Economice, Bucureşti

Abstract

Intercultural competency is the term used to describe the ability to work across cultures through an understanding of cultures on a general level in terms of communication and working styles. Intercultural competency also involves the development of one's skills and attitudes in successfully interacting with persons of diverse backgrounds. Universities try to prepare their students for careers in organizations whose business relations span borders worldwide. Competing with increasing globalization, universities have recognized the need for programs where students participate in a series of experiences designed to offer opportunities to increase intercultural competency.

Key-words: intercultural competencies, career development, culture, organization, higher education

Preliminary considerations

Intercultural competency is the term used to describe the ability to work across cultures through an understanding of cultures on a general level in terms of communication and working styles. Intercultural competency also involves the development of one's skills and attitudes in successfully interacting with persons of diverse backgrounds.

Universities try to prepare their students for careers in organizations whose business relations span borders worldwide. This means increasing the percentage of students who participate in global education such as international internships, active citizenship, and study abroad. In order to be successful in an international organization in the future, students need

to find time now to acquire an intentional approach to their academic and co-curricular activities and to reflect on the relationship between these experiences and career goals.

Competing with increasing globalization, universities have recognized the need for programs where students participate in a series of experiences designed to offer opportunities to increase intercultural competency. Therefore, there are many benefits to intercultural competency training:

- *self-awareness:* people learn about their own strengths, weaknesses, prejudices and preconceptions.
- *builds confidence:* cultural competency training promotes self-confidence in individuals and teams through empowerment.
- *breaks down barriers:* our cultural training demystifies 'the other' and creates awareness.
- *builds trust:* awareness leads to dialogue which leads to understanding which results in trust.
- *motivates:* through self-analysis people begin to recognize areas in which they need to improve and become motivated to develop.
- *opens horizons:* cultural competency training helps people think outside the box.
- *develops skills:* participants develop better 'people skills' - they begin to deal with people with sensitivity and empathy.
- *develops listening skills:* by becoming good listeners, people become good communicators.
- *using common ground:* rather than focus on differences participants move towards creating a shared space.
- *career development:* cross cultural competence training enhances people's skills and therefore future employment.

Career Development

Personnel in the organizations need to develop their ability to manage personal career and to work in multicultural teams. Organizations no matter which size they are in all across the industries are facing common challenge: how to attract and retain the best employees in order to be successful in the long run and global business environment. Companies recognized that to recruit people and even more to retain them becomes more and more

challenging. Both organizations and individuals are discussing the topic that organizations can't offer career development for people.

The top attributes that global-minded employers value in a successful employee are: general cognitive skills; problem-solving, analytical ability; interpersonal and relationship skills; personal traits (character, self-reliance, dependability); cross-cultural competence (ability to work well in different cultures and with people of different origins); competitiveness, drive; internet and information technology competency; managerial training and experience; foreign language fluency.

Employees also develop the ability to establish, in culturally diverse contexts, environments for creativity and innovation based on an understanding of the prerequisite conditions. Finally, the employees acquires a knowledge and understanding of conflict resolution strategies needed to bring consensus in negotiation, and of problem solving strategies so that they can transform ideas into realization. In cross-cultural contexts, some management competences as, the ability to solve a range of often complex problems, to be productive in negotiation process, the notably project management and others need to be combined with an understanding of the impact of culture and the ability to communicate with people from other cultures.

The career may have many meanings for individual employees. For some, it may be the vehicle through which basic economic needs are satisfied. For others, it may provide a sense of social status or social worth. In other cases, the career may represent individual's dream of life, offering structure, direction, meaning and purpose to one's daily activities. Since we may conceive of work as primarily a social activity, to 'have a career' thus implies much more than, for example, an exchange of labor for financial return. With socio-economic changes, the individual becomes the core in whole career process. Today we are talking about individual – manager of his own career as well as his own life. While studying in high school youths start to understand what they are looking for, what they would like to do for career planning and management, how to develop their professional career and achieve emotional comfort in their lives. Four stages of career development: assessment; exploration; goal setting and planning, strategy are most important for personal career development.

By knowing himself, individual is much more successful in his job, communication and cooperation with others as well as in whole life. When we talk about career in

individual's life we use 'career' term in four main aspects: career – achievement (mainly professional); career – occupation and position; career – as consequence of different positions and experience in different areas and organizations; career – as whole life experience with all roles individual has in his life (family, social activities, life style, etc.). Individual career maybe evaluated only by individual himself, as only individual knows what his goals are, what for he is striving in his life. It is unethical to judge one's success or failure externally as we are not aware what choices individual has in his life. Personal career is the most important choice in the life. Successful professional career mainly depends on individual not on organization. This includes relations between colleagues, current and potential employers, friends and family. Just before planning our career we try to understand whether we are able to manage ourselves. Career reflects our life in working environment.

Higher education

Late modernity, and particularly globalization, has produced a metamorphosis in self-images and goals among universities around the world. The hegemony of neo-liberalism has prevailed in ideologies and policies of higher education. Accordingly, the European Union stresses mutual exchange of 'know how', strategic utilization of competencies, quality-improvement of higher education and the vital role of higher education for ensuring sustainable development and life quality for people. Most clearly these ideas are expressed in the *Bologna Declaration* (1999): "A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an aware of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space. The importance of education and educational cooperation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount".

The European Union also stresses the need for educating a future labour force that 'possesses' adequate intercultural competencies. Few people today would claim that the world is static. Rather, it is axiomatic that a rapidly changing and increasingly global, multicultural world requires increasingly complex skills and knowledge from people. Yet educational institutions are not fully prepared to accommodate the needs of late modernity,

nor is the human potential to learn and obtain such 'new' competencies fully adequate. Internationalization should induce tolerance and respect, in students. The idealistic view of internationalization can be criticized. Being clearly counterproductive to its ambitions, it may come across as arrogant and may sustain ethnocentric worldviews – i.e., it is seen as a one-way flow where 'they can learn from us' and 'we have little to learn from them'. Internationalization is seen as an efficient instrument to educate the 'uncivilized'. Internationalization, life-long learning and inclusive education are means to ensure a sufficiently large and skilful labour force, adequate for an increasingly complex global and multicultural market. The university is responsible for providing students with the information, knowledge and skills they need to compete in a complex international marketplace.

Intercultural Competence

Common sense tells us that internationalization, in one way or another is about inter-cultural communication. The *phenomenon* of intercultural communication is a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures.

Moreover, intercultural communication is by some social scientists seen as an academic *discipline* – that is to say, one branch of communication studies, anchored in its characteristical ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions. At the same time, intercultural communication is a field of concern for several other academic disciplines (e.g., psychology, social psychology, sociology, education, media studies and management). For them, intercultural communication is viewed as an object of study or a problem within the realms of these disciplines.

First and foremost, intercultural competence is a question of openness to differences and knowledge of their historical context. It is not a question of pretending to be someone else than one actually is. Communication between social groups also calls for intercultural competence. Every society is interwoven with social differences: both those that are the result of real difference in access to resources and objective status and those that are more the product of people's imagination. Living together in a society calls for intercultural competence on the part of all those involved. One could say that the democratization of society, among other things, involves everyone developing as much intercultural competence

as possible. And since we live to an increasing extent in an internationalized world-society, democratic development at a global level is also a question of all of us developing a broad intercultural competence, by means of which we can adopt a stance towards social, national-cultural and ethnic differences. In language subjects, we focus on the role of language in intercultural competence. That means that we are especially conscious of the cultural differences that have to do with the use of language: semantic distinctions in the vocabulary, linguistic patterns of action, connections between content and form in texts, etc.

Briefly, intercultural competence involves five elements:

- attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

- knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.

- skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

- skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

- critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

In short someone with some degree of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of their own and other cultures - someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. Assessing knowledge is thus only a small part of what is involved and what needs to be assessed is learners' ability to step outside, to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, and to act on that change of perspective.

Developing one's intercultural competence is an aspect of the lifelong socialisation process, or - to express it in more constructivist terms - a lifelong project. From early

childhood and throughout our lives, we learn more and more about dealing with social and cultural differences and relating to them in developing our own identity. When we are involved in formal learning of a foreign or second language - at school or during teacher education - there is special focus on a particular kind of cultural differences, namely the national or the ethnic. We can be more or less aware of cultural, ethnic and linguistic variation - and of international and transnational relationships - but the national or nation-state framework normally asserts itself at some level or other - at least when it comes to language teaching in Europe.

It is important to stress that intercultural competence should not simply be perceived as 'bicultural'. All present-day societies are culturally complex at many levels, as a result of cultural developments. Nation states attempt, generally speaking, to maintain an awareness of a common national culture and identity, though, in fact, cultural complexity reigns - a complexity that is characterised by the power structures that exist in the societies concerned and in the world. Intercultural competence is the ability to handle this cultural complexity in the micro-context and the macro-context. Intercultural competence is an active and productive ability, for, in actually using it, we create culture in the classroom. In communicating, we create or confirm our identities, and understanding is an active process where one creates an understanding of what has been said from one's own perspective and own horizon.

Conclusion

Intercultural competence is used for many things: to sell Coca Cola all over the world, to delay vital decisions in the UN, to organize international drugs trafficking, to incite nationalist and racialist movements. But we probably agree that intercultural competence justifies itself by creating certain preconditions for intercultural understanding and cooperation. If we take an extra step, intercultural competence has to do with the ability to establish cross-cultural movements, organizations and institutions that can fight for a better world and seek to prevent the great social and environmental problems.

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Monica Condruz-Bacescu is a PhD Lecturer of Business Communication in English at the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest where she teaches Business English. She holds a Master degree and a PhD in economics and has taken part in many conferences and symposia with contributions on communication in business english, english literature and economics. She is the author of more than 40 articles and 4 books and co-author of 2 textbooks for students of Cybernetics.