Topic 3.1: Challenges of working in multicultural environments

1. Multicultural working environments

Many people encounter the differences of national cultures not only as tourists, but also in their everyday working lives, as the rapid process of migration, internationalisation and globalisation automatically leads to a networking of cultures within the context of multinational and multicultural organizations (Konečná 2006).

Multicultural environment means diversity regarding ethnicity, gender, religion, social affiliation, etc. A multicultural environment binds employees with different cultural backgrounds. Working in such an environment is characterized by different approaches to time, information, planning, decision making, relationships, communication style, conflict resolution, power, development of leadership and motivation (Stoyanova, 2013).

Living and working in a multicultural environment can be an enriching experience, raising awareness and understanding of different points of view and expertise. It can encourage problem-solving skills and creativity, as well as the ability to better interact with colleagues and clients from different cultural and national backgrounds. While the ability to successfully connect with people from different cultural backgrounds is often taken for granted, it is important to be aware of the related requirements and challenges and develop possible solutions (Grimmette, 2019),

2. Requirements for working in multicultural environments

Working in an international environment with people from diverse backgrounds, races and nationalities can be an enriching and fulfilling professional experience. It can expand one's horizons by learning different communication skills and approaches while interacting with people from all over the world (McQuerrey, 2018). However, working successfully in a multicultural working environment requires certain basic attitudes.

2.1 Patience and Understanding

Working with colleagues in a multicultural environment requires a certain amount of patience. People from diverse backgrounds often have different ways of approaching tasks and interacting with each other. These are neither right nor wrong, they are just different. Having the patience to take the time to completely understand where colleagues are coming from in various workplace settings can contribute to a more efficient and effective collaboration (McQuerrey, 2018).

2.2 Respectful Acceptance

Cultural differences are large and diverse, from religious beliefs to cultural norms. People from different backgrounds bring a range of different socially acceptable professional and personal practices to the workplace. Regardless of the extent to which one agrees or disagrees with colleagues, it is important to respect their differences. This means avoiding commenting on things with which one is unfamiliar or does not particularly agree. It is important to accept the cultural backgrounds of colleagues for what they are (McQuerrey, 2018).

2.3 Leeway in Language Use

People who are not native speakers of the language commonly spoken in the business organization might accidentally use words or expressions that could seem inappropriate for the workplace. Therefore, colleagues with new language skills should be given some leeway in the use of their words. If it appears that a colleague is inadvertently offending customers due to inexperience with certain accepted customs and practices, the problem should be discussed privately with the HR manager. This person is trained to handle such situations professionally and effectively (McQuerrey, 2018).

2.4 Willingness to Learn

Working with people from different backgrounds exposes employees to customs, cultures and practices that they might otherwise never have encountered. The willingness to get to know colleagues on a personal level creates a feeling of goodwill in the workplace, which can result in better professional cooperation. Most people are more than happy to talk about differences between cultures, if asked in an appropriate way. This may lead to a better understanding of why people think, behave and act the way they do. As an employee in a multicultural environment, you should therefore be open to talk about your own background and cultural beliefs (McQuerrey, 2018).

3. Main challenges of working in multicultural environments

One of the biggest challenges is a lack of knowledge and understanding of how cultural aspects influence the process of communication. The concepts of low and high context cultures as well as monochronic and polychronic time perception are related to this (Grimmette, 2019).

3.1 Low and high context cultures

In high context cultures, such as China and Japan, work partners prefer to communicate with people they frequently work with. Therefore, getting to know each other and building trust and a good relationship is essential before any business discussion can begin. Due to this careful preparation, mutual understanding is taken for granted in business communication and can include implicit content, indirect references to key ideas, body language and silence. Business people from low context cultures, such as the US and Germany, might misunderstand this behaviour and try to get down to business too quickly by insisting on explicit and detailed explanations. This can lead to a breakdown in communication (Grimmette, 2019).

3.2 Monochronic and polychronic time perception

Different cultures can perceive time differently. People with a monochronic time orientation, such as Swiss and British, tend to prioritize the completion of tasks and manage their time carefully and efficiently to achieve their goal. Due to this attitude, they may clash with people with a polychronic orientation like Latin Americans, who put people and relationships first and complete tasks whenever possible. If these different perspectives and needs are not understood and properly discussed, this may cause confusion about schedules or deadlines, and difficulties in agreeing on how to organize and conduct meetings (Grimmette, 2019).

3.3 Selection of a suitable communication medium

It is also essential to select the most appropriate medium of communication. People who focus on personal relationships and convey a lot of information through body language, visual information and implicit meanings tend to prefer face-to-face communication. Business people from cultures that tend to focus on tasks in a time-efficient manner may make more use of written communication, which makes the ability to provide information in writing and to structure ideas clearly a highly requested skill. It is particularly important to remember that

it's necessary to understand different cultures and avoid imposing communication patterns that may not fit. It does not mean entirely adapting to a different cultural context at the expense of one' s own goals and priorities. Rather, it is important to cooperate with employees, business partners and customers so that functioning communication patterns and routines can be negotiated (Grimmette, 2019).

4. Recommended actions for working in multicultural environments

The recommended actions are not about learning to communicate best with Southern Europeans, Germans or Asians. Rather, they are about raising awareness of other cultures when working in a multicultural environment. Self-reflection plays an important role as well. Management should also provide such recommendations to employees, making them aware that commonalities are paramount and that it can also be an advantage when a monochronic culture meets a polychronic one. The advantages for the daily work routine should not be forced upon the employees but should be recognized personally (Arslan, 2013, p. 13). The following table shows possible success factors and the corresponding recommended actions for working in a multicultural environment:

Success factor	Recommended action
Intercultural sensitivity	➤ Open-mindedness towards other cultures ➤ Respect for cultural differences
Intercultural skills	➤ Learning foreign languages ➤ Flexibility ➤ Social competence
Knowledge	➤ Acquire knowledge about other cultures ➤ Create opportunities for employees and managers to acquire such knowledge
Experiences with foreigners	➤ Facilitate stays abroad ➤ Enable language trainings ➤ Introduce mentoring programs
Cultural self-perception	➤ Get to know oneself ➤ Recognize commonalities between cultures ➤ Put one's own culture into perspective
Framework conditions	➤ Create opportunities ➤ Enable informal communication

Table 1: Success factors and recommended actions
Source: adapted from Arslan, 2013, p. 14

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