

OPINIONS OF EUROPEAN MANAGERS ON THE CHALLENGES OF TEAM MANAGEMENT IN MULTICULTURAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS

WYZWANIA W ZARZĄDZANIU ZESPOŁAMI W WIELOKULTUROWYM ŚRODOWISKU PRACY W OPINII EUROPEJSKICH MENEDŻERÓW

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Abstract: In contemporary companies, the knowledge and experience of both employees and managers significantly influence decision-making, operational effectiveness, and strategy implementation, especially in conditions of the continuously increasing role played by international cooperation. Multiculturalism is not only a common feature of companies which operate in the global market but also increasingly a key factor when it comes to people management. Although cultural diversity can bring many positive effects, it can also be a source of a range of problems. Thus it is so important for managers of culturally diverse teams to understand the essence of multiculturalism, to be able to manage cultural diversity skilfully, and to endorse values and adhere to principles which are highly relevant in multicultural work environments. The study presented in the article (individual in-depth interviews) was conducted among managers from six European countries. The main aim of the study was to identify challenges posed by multicultural work environments based on the opinions of managers who work with multicultural teams. The theoretical part of the article explains the concept of multiculturalism and presents multiculturalism in the context of management in contemporary work environments. The empirical part discusses the results of the interviews and the resulting conclusions. Undoubtedly, multiculturalism poses numerous challenges to managers in the area of people management, and the results of the study have confirmed that managers face considerable challenges in multicultural work environments (especially in the areas regarding managers' factual knowledge on and preparation for the management of teams, the level of their cultural intelligence, communication, and employee motivation).

Keywords: multicultural work environment, cultural diversity, cultural differences, multicultural teams, managers, employees

Abstract: We współczesnych przedsiębiorstwach wiedza i doświadczenia pracowników oraz menedżerów istotnie wpływają na podejmowane decyzje, skuteczność działania i realizację strategii, szczególnie w warunkach ciągle rosnącego znaczenia międzynarodowej współpracy. Wielokulturowość, będąc dziś powszechnym atrybutem wielu firm działających na globalnym rynku, staje się też ważną determinantą zarządzania ludźmi. Różnorodność kulturowa może przynieść dużo pozytywnych efektów, ale także być przyczyną problemów. Ważne jest więc rozumienie istoty wielokulturowości, umiejętne zarządzanie kulturową różnorodnością oraz przestrzeganie wartości i zasad ważnych w zróżnicowanych kulturowo zespołach. Badania opisywane w artykule (indywidualne wywiady pogłębione) zrealizowano wśród menedżerów z 6 krajów europejskich. Głównym celem artykułu jest zidentyfikowanie wyzwań w wielokulturowym środowisku pracy w oparciu o opinie menedżerów, którzy zarządzają wielokulturowymi zespołami. W części teoretycznej artykułu wyjaśniono pojęcie wielokulturowości i opisano wielokulturowość w kontekście zarządzania współczesnym środowiskiem pracy. W części empirycznej omówiono wyniki przeprowadzonych wywiadów i wynikające z nich wnioski. Wielokulturowość stawia dziś przed menedżerami liczne wyzwania w obszarze zarządzania ludźmi, i wyniki badania (wywiadów z europejskimi managerami) potwierdzają, że mierzą się oni z istotnymi wyzwaniami w zarządzaniu zespołami w wielokulturowym środowisku pracy (zwłaszcza w obszarach związanych z merytorycznym przygotowaniem menedżerów do zarządzania wielokulturowymi zespołami, poziomem inteligencji kulturowej menedżerów, komunikacją i motywowaniem pracowników).

Słowa kluczowe: wielokulturowe środowisko pracy, różnorodność kulturowa, różnice kulturowe, zespoły wielokulturowe, menedżerowie, pracownicy

Introduction

This article looks at the challenges posed by multicultural work environments as identified by European managers with considerable experience

in multicultural team management in multinational companies. Working in a multicultural environment and successfully managing people from diverse

cultural backgrounds requires for managers to be open and tolerant in their attitudes and behaviours, to be able to understand, account for, and accept cultural differences in their daily work, and to skillfully share their knowledge and experience with the representatives of other cultures.

Effective interactions between different cultures often lead to increased performance of both teams and entire organisations. In multicultural work environments, employees from diverse cultures meet in their daily work, which poses numerous challenges for managers, especially in human resource management, e.g., in areas linked to communication, employee motivation, and conflict management.

A multicultural work environment is now a standard environment in many companies, which is a direct result of progressing globalisation and the internationalisation of businesses (Adamczyk, 2017; Arciszewska, 2023; Ditta, 2020; Knap-Stefaniuk, Sorribes 2021a). Undoubtedly, multiculturalism brings with it a number of benefits for teams and companies. Employees from diverse cultures bring to their work environments ideas, solutions, and experiences from different markets, which makes teamwork in a multicultural environment not only more innovative and creative but also more productive.

The coexistence of diverse cultures within a single team or organisation means that it is necessary to build relationships between employees based on such fundamental values as understanding, respect, and tolerance (Baporikar, 2020; Lozano, Escrich, 2017; Morris, 2023; Zaki, Karim and Khan, 2019). In multicultural work environments, managers' responsibility in the area of people management is of particular importance. First and foremost, they should understand and accept multiculturalism, but their knowledge of and experience in managing culturally diverse teams is equally valuable.

The aim of the study described in this article was to identify challenges for team management when it comes to multicultural work environments in contemporary organisations based on the opinions of managers from six European countries and their experience in managing multicultural teams. In an attempt to meet this aim, the author has posed the following research question: What are the most significant challenges in team management in multicultural conditions (in multicultural work environments)?

1. Literature review – multiculturalism in the contemporary work environment

According to Stepaniuk (2021), the phenomenon of multiculturalism is among the key determinants which create the contemporary world and interpersonal relations. Multiculturalism has been analysed in different contexts by both Polish researchers (e.g., Adamczyk, 2017; Gadomska-Lila, 2017; Golka, 2010; Guziuk-Tkacz, Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2015; Karna, Knap-Stefaniuk, 2018; Nikitorowicz, 2018; Szerłaż, 2020, Szpilko, Szydło, Samul, 2022) and researchers from other countries (e.g., Jackson, Van de Vijver, 2018; Oerlemans, Peeters, 2009; Shafaat, 2018; Sogancilar, Ors, 2018; Stahl, Maznevski, 2021; Ye, Buchtel, 2021; Velten, Lashley, 2017; Villotti, Stinglhamber and Desmette, 2019), from different disciplines of science, including sociology, psychology, education, philosophy, and management.

Nikitorowicz argues that multiculturalism is associated with, among other things, "(...) the membership of an individual or a group in two or more cultural environments, living in a shared or similar world of sensations, experiences, and symbols; with the existence of internal pluralism, awareness of the values endorsed within other cultures and respect for one's indigenous values (...)" (Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 244).

For Ojukwu and Oni (2017), multiculturalism consists in cultural security, diversity, and equity. It can be defined as a behavioural pattern based on appreciation, tolerance, and promotion of diverse cultures and identities present in given communities (Olanrewaju, Loromeke, Adekoye, 2017).

According to Ramakrishna (2013), multiculturalism – as the representation of difference – entails accepting and tolerating differences in cultural identities and encouraging peaceful coexistence of various cultures. Multiculturalism is frequently described as a contrastive approach to the plurality of cultures. On a descriptive level, multiculturalism entails the presence and side-by-side functioning of many different and distinct cultures within a defined geographical area and within social or political structures (cited in Nikitorowicz, Guzik-Tracz, 2021, p. 24). According to J.F.A. Stoner (2011), multiculturalism is a view that there exist numerous cultural resources and cultural factors which are highly relevant to organisations. People from diverse backgrounds can work together, cooperate, and be accepted in one organisation.

Multicultural environments embrace different forms of diversity, e.g., those related to ethnicity, gender, religion, social affiliation, and cultural background. According to Rozkwitalska (2013), the role played by multiculturalism is growing primarily

as a result of globalisation. Increasingly more organisations are multicultural environments whose multicultural teams comprise at least two diverse national cultures.

Nowadays, the development of companies in international markets leads to the creation of teams whose members represent different nationalities and cultures. Cultural differences have a major impact on the work of multicultural teams, especially in the area of communication, approaches to problem solving, decision-making, and the rules and methods of working together. For teams these differences entail both opportunities and threats. Therefore, it is worth emphasising that working in multicultural teams (in multicultural work environments) is a complex phenomenon, the success or failure of which cannot be anticipated in advance. The performance of such teams depends on a wide range of various factors.

Managers should be aware of all these factors and work on improving and developing those of them which can be changed. Undoubtedly, managing a culturally diverse team, as well as being part of it, is a challenge. Setting goals that are shared by an entire team is essential in building a good atmosphere in the workplace and in successful cooperation between employees who come from different cultures. It is crucial to believe that everyone equally contributes to the goals of multicultural teams and deserves the same respect as other team members, regardless of the culture they come from (Adamczyk 2017; Knap-Stefaniuk, Sorribes, 2021b; Maznevski, Stahl, 2021; Shaban, 2016).

Multicultural teams, both in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, have been of increasing interest to researchers for years (e.g., Backmann, et al, 2020; Cramton, Hinds, 2014; Crotty, Brett, 2012; Earley, Gibson, 2002; Gadomska-Lila, 2017; Horwitz, Horwitz, 2007; Jang, 2017; Kopertyńska, 2018; Morris, 2023; Szpilko, Szydło and Samul, 2022; Tenzer, Pudielko, Harzing, 2014).

Nowadays multicultural teams are a frequent feature of organisational structures of big, medium, and small enterprises alike (Donnellon, 2006). Halverson and Tirmizi (2008) define a multicultural team as a set of employees who come from diverse cultures, cooperate while performing their tasks, jointly share responsibility for outcomes, who perceive themselves (and are also perceived by others) as intact social entities embedded in various social systems, and who maintain their relationships within organisations where they work and outside them.

Although multicultural teams are a potential source of problems related to, among others,

different languages, religions, thinking patterns, and ways of perceiving reality, they can also bring to an organisation and its members a number of benefits, especially if cultural diversity is skilfully managed (Areiqat, et al, 2020; Don-Solomon, Fakidouma, 2021; Karna, Knap-Stefaniuk, 2018; Kopertyńska, 2018; Kuc, Żmigala, 2010; Stahl, et al., 2010; Zaki, Karim, Khan, 2019).

According to Kopertyńska (2018), people who come from different countries and cultures often have different perspectives on particular issues. Thus, diverse ideas are generated in multicultural teams, which undoubtedly increases their creativity, broadens the horizons of team members, and leads to innovative ideas and solutions to various problems. Another benefit of multicultural work environments is that they offer employees an opportunity to learn about other cultures, which increases their tolerance, empathy and understanding of the needs of others in an organisation. Team members who come from different geographic regions of the world allow a team to better meet customers' needs and expectations.

Maximisation of the synergy and human potential of a multicultural team translates into its more creative approach to solving complex problems and making difficult decisions. The personal and professional experiences of members of multicultural teams allow work-related issues to be approached from different perspectives and can serve as an inspiration to others to search for new, unconventional solutions, which leads to an increase in the intellectual capital of an organisation (Walczak, 2011).

It is also worth emphasising that the presence of multicultural teams in an organisation reinforces the values of the intra-organisational culture shared by managers and other employees, which creates a good atmosphere in the workplace. A climate of openness and, trust in the team fosters increased commitment and improves work efficiency. By providing the conditions for an open exchange of ideas, opinions, and views, organisations benefit from the cultural diversity of their workforce.

Hiring employees from different cultural backgrounds increases a company's competitiveness in new markets. A product or service must be tailored to the needs and expectations of customers, which requires knowledge of the local regulations, language, customs, and business connections (Bačík, Turáková, 2018; Gao, 2023; Ponomareva, Uman, Bodolica and Wennberg, 2022).

The assumption that cultures can permeate and complement one another is the foundation for effective cooperation in multicultural environ-

ments. This cooperation gives rise to the emergence of relevant values, which allows cultural diversity to become a tool for organisational development (Nadziakiewicz, 2018). Hence, inter-cultural management becomes a crucial area of responsibility for modern managers who work in multicultural environments. Intercultural management accounts for and bridges cultural differences between employees in an organisation and aims to improve communication within it and in its dealings with the international environment (Greblikaite Daugeliene, 2010). It covers various areas, including team management, leadership, corporate strategy, organisational structure, human resource management, knowledge management, and conflict resolution (Mead and Andrews, 2009, p. 49; Kwatra, 2019).

The essence of multicultural management primarily consists in the effective implementation of solutions aimed at integrating cultural diversity, creating conditions for employees to share their knowledge, experiences, and innovative ideas with others, supporting teams in their task performance, appreciating their efforts, shaping employee motivation and commitment, and resolving conflicts quickly and satisfactorily (Amaram, 2007; Celikdemir, Katrinli, 2020; Jain, Pareek, 2019; Maharani, Mono, and Perangin-Angin, 2022). Other vital aspects include organising work, expressing emotions, building interpersonal relationships, formulating goals, completing tasks, and evaluating results (Jabłońska, 2018, pp. 17-19).

As the above literature review reveals, management in multicultural work environments is a highly topical and inspiring research area, especially in the context of challenges managers face in their work with culturally diverse teams.

2. Research methodology

The participants of the study were recruited by means of the snowball technique, which consists in the non-probability sampling of respondents: an initially selected small group of respondents takes part in a study and each member of this group recommends other individuals who belong to the general population. These individuals also take part in a study, and its sample size increases. One of the advantages of this sampling technique is that it allows a researcher to recruit respondents in the absence of a relevant census or when it is difficult to gain access to them by other means (Szreder, 2004).

The individual in-depth interview technique was used during the interviews, and a dedicated interview scenario was developed for the interviews on which the study was based. The advantage of such interviews is that a scenario anticipates potential topics that may appear during an interview and does not contain detailed questions, which offers researchers some freedom in directing their study (Nicińska, 2000, 41). Some interviews in the study were conducted directly during face-to-face meetings (those with managers from Poland and also those with managers from the Czech Republic, Spain, and Italy, which the author conducted during her research trips to these countries), while others – those with managers from Portugal and France – were conducted via the Zoom application.

The interviews lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Managers were informed about the purpose of the study, the form of the interviews, and the confidentiality of its results. The interviews with the Polish managers were conducted in Polish, while those with managers from other countries were conducted in English. The interviews were not recorded, and the author took notes of the respondents' answers. The collected empirical material was analysed qualitatively and, whenever it was possible, also quantitatively.

3. A multicultural work environment and related challenges – the results of the study

The study described in the article was conducted between May and August 2023. The author conducted 30 interviews with respondents from six European countries (the Czech Republic, Portugal, France, Spain, Italy, and Poland; five interviews with managers of each nationality). The respondents were managers with a minimum of three years in a managerial position in a multinational company i.e., in a multicultural work environment, who work with culturally diverse teams which comprise members from a minimum of three different cultures.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents (managers) who took part in the interviews.

The purpose of the interviews conducted with 30 respondents (five managers from each of the six countries) was to collect information concerning European managers' knowledge about and experience with multiculturalism, with a particular focus on the challenges they face in managing teams in multicultural work environments. The managers' responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents (managers)

Criterion	Czech Republic	Portugal	France	Spain	Italy	Poland
Age	36-51	38-44	38-50	35-46	37-45	34-53
Female	1	1	2	2	1	2
Male	4	4	3	3	4	3
Number of years in a managerial position	4-13	5-10	4-11	4-11	5-11	4-15
Number of nationalities (cultures) in a team managed by the manager	3	5	4	4	4	3

Source: own study based on interviews with the European managers.

Table 2. Challenges in team management in multicultural work environments

Challenges	Czech Republic	Portugal	France	Spain	Italy	Poland
Managers' factual knowledge on and preparation to manage teams in multicultural environments	5	5	5	5	5	5
Managers' level of cultural intelligence	5	5	5	5	5	5
Communication	5	5	5	5	5	5
Recruitment and selection	4	3	4	4	3	3
Remuneration	4	4	4	4	4	4
Employee motivation	5	5	5	5	5	5
Training and development	4	4	4	4	4	4
Performance appraisal (individual and team)	4	4	4	4	4	4
Conflict resolution	4	5	5	5	4	4
Competence management	4	4	4	4	4	4
Talent management	4	4	4	4	4	4
Change management	4	4	5	5	4	5

Source: own study based on interviews with the European managers.

The empirical material obtained during the interviews revealed that managers know and understand the concept of multiculturalism and possess knowledge on and experience with managing teams in multicultural work environments. The challenges in the area of team management listed by the managers included: managers' factual knowledge on and preparation to manage teams in multicultural environments; managers' level of cultural intelligence; communication; recruitment and selection; remuneration; employee motivation; development and training; performance appraisals; conflict resolution; competence management; talent management; and change management.

4. Discussion

The information obtained from the managers allowed the author to answer the research question formulated at the beginning of the study: what are the most significant challenges in team management in multicultural conditions (in multicultural work environments) in the opinion of European managers? The respondents' answers indicated that the most significant challenges in this area are: a managers' factual knowledge on and preparation for the management of teams in multicultural environments; and a managers' level of cultural intelligence, communication, and employee motivation (these challenges were selected by all the respondents).

Challenges linked with both working in multicultural teams and managing such teams have been researched in recent years. For example, managers who participated in the study conducted by Kopertyńska (2018, p. 21) (they came from Poland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ukraine, Belarus, France, Greece, India, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Romania, and Korea) considered communication, language barriers, and the way in which team leaders manage their teams to be the main constraints (challenges) in managing multicultural teams. In their opinion, managing multicultural teams requires strong interpersonal skills and extensive knowledge about other countries' cultures, beliefs, and traditions.

The Polish and Romanian participants of the study conducted by Szpilko, Szydło and Samul (2022, p. 5-7) listed the following difficulties (challenges) linked with working in multicultural teams: communication, including language barrier, a lack of experience in working in multicultural teams, a lack of relevant competencies, and a lack of motivation.

Sogancilar and Ors (2018, p. 263-265) reported the results of the study which covered 14 respondents with experience in multicultural team management. In their opinion, the challenges involved in managing multicultural teams include ineffective communication and misunderstandings, different working styles and expectations, a lack of tolerance, and a lack of knowledge about diversity.

Undoubtedly, the area of management in multicultural work environments is highly topical and gaining in importance, which directly stems from the scale and dynamic nature of globalisation processes.

5. Limitations and future research directions

The author is aware of the limitations of the interviews she conducted. The study has an international (cross-cultural) dimension, but due to its qualitative nature it was conducted on a small research sample (interviews with five managers from each of six European countries). The snowball technique used to recruit the respondents limited the possibility of recruiting other potential interview participants. Hence, in the future, it would be worth conducting a study on larger research samples and employing other techniques in respondent selection.

In the author's opinion, future research directions could concern specific aspects of team management in multicultural work environments, e.g., communication in culturally diverse teams, employee motivation, or conflict management (when researching different areas of people management

it is also advisable to take into account the perspectives of both managers and employees).

Conclusions

The interviews conducted in the study were the basis for identifying the most significant challenges in the area of team management in multicultural work environments. According to the respondents (managers from the Czech Republic, Portugal, France, Spain, Italy and Poland), these challenges primarily include: a managers' factual knowledge on and preparation to manage teams in multicultural environments; and a managers' level of cultural intelligence, communication, and employee motivation.

The presence of multicultural teams in multicultural work environments is the result of the development of enterprises on a global scale. Managing such teams requires that managers possess relevant cultural knowledge, strong interpersonal skills, and cultural intelligence. Factual knowledge on the differences and similarities between diverse cultures is essential in: planning and organising the work of multicultural teams; the process of recruiting and selecting employees for such teams; motivating team members and developing their commitment; effective intercultural communication; performance appraisal of individuals and teams; planning employee training and development; competences management; talent management; conflict resolution; and change management.

Team management in conditions of cultural differences is an area of increasing interest for researchers and practitioners. Multiculturalism in the work environment can be, on the one hand, a source of satisfaction, offering innovative solutions and greater creativity, as well as being an excellent opportunity for employees to share their knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, it undoubtedly poses numerous challenges, especially for managers, as these challenges relate to the delicate matter of people management.

Management, especially by committed managers, is of vital importance. Managers who work in multicultural work environments and manage multicultural teams should be open, approachable, considerate, tolerant, and flexible in their activities and communication. Managers who manage teams in conditions of cultural diversity should not only possess competences conducive to the successful management of multicultural teams but also be aware of the challenges posed by working in multicultural work environments. Other qualities indispensable in the effective management of multicultural teams include tolerance, respect, empathy, openness, and goal orientation.

The phenomenon of multiculturalism is in itself a major challenge for managers, especially in the area of people management. The coexistence of diverse cultures has a significant impact on team performance. Therefore, the successful building of teams and managing their work in a multicultural work environment should account for cultural differences, and managers should use their potential to stimulate effective performance of their multicultural teams.

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