Malgorzata Rozkwitalska[1], Michal Chmielecki[2], Sylwia Przytula[3]
THE POSITIVES OF CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

The authors attempt to explore the positives of cross-cultural interactions in multinational companies (MNCs). The prior research has generally accentuated the problems in the relationship among foreigners and less effort has been made so far to examine the benefits of multiculturalism. Therefore, there is a need to fill in the gap identified above by providing the evidence that professional contacts with representatives from a different national cultural background may be very useful for both MNCs and individuals who are employed by them. The results of the authors' study suggest that the following major positives can be obtained due to cultural diversity, namely: 1) personal growth; 2) flexibility in working styles; 3) enhanced learning; 4) more perspectives, self-reflection; 5) individual benefits; 6) more effective communication; and finally 7) confrontation with stereotypes.
Keywords: cross-cultural interaction; cultural diversity; multicultural teams; multiculturalism; multinational companies.

Малгожата Розквітальська, Міхал Хмєлєцкі, Сильвія Пжитула
ПОЗИТИВНІ РИСИ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ У МІЖНАРОДНИХ КОМПАНІЯХ

У статті досліджено позитивні сторони міжкультурної комунікації всередині міжнародних корпорацій. Зазвичай у подібних дослідженнях акцент робиться на проблемах спілкування іноземців, а переваги мультикультуралізму практично не досліджуються. Автори ж даної статті доводять, що професійні контакти з представниками різних культур можуть бути корисними як для корпорацій, так і на індивідуальному рівні. Найбільш позитивні моменти від культурного різноманіття спостерігаються у таких сферах: 1) персональний ріст; 2) гнучкість стилів роботи; 3) інтенсивне навчання; 4) нові напрямки для рефлексії; 5) особисті переваги; 6) більш ефективна комунікація та 7) подолання стереотипів.
Ключові слова: міжкультурне спілкування; культурне різноманіття; міжнаціональні команди; мультикультуралізм; міжнародні компанії.
Літ. 32.

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ПОЗИТИВНЫЕ ЧЕРТЫ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ В МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ КОМПАНИЯХ

В статье исследованы позитивные стороны межкультурной коммуникации внутри международных корпораций. Обычно в подобных исследованиях акцент делается на проблемах общения иностранцев, а преимущества мультикультурализма практически не исследованы. Авторы данной статьи доказывают, что профессиональные контакты с представителями различных культур могут быть полезными как для корпораций, так и на индивидуальном уровне. Наиболее позитивные моменты от культурного разнообразия наблюдаются в таких сферах: 1) персональный рост; 2) гибкость стилей работы; 3) интенсивное обучение; 4) новые направления для рефлексии; 5) личные преимущества; 6) более эффективная коммуникация и 7) преодоление стереотипов.
Ключевые слова: межкультурное общение; культурное разнообразие; межнациональные команды; мультикультурализм; международные компании.

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1. Introduction

Due to globalization, multinational companies (MNCs) are an inherent element of the world economic landscape. They have appeared to be multicultural since they consist of members, who represent various, frequently very distant national cultures. Those people face serious challenges caused by cultural diversity, thus, not surprisingly, problems typical of contacts with representatives of different cultures have dominated prior studies (Hernandez-Mogollon et al., 2010; Luo & Shenkar, 2006; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; Rozkwitalska, 2012; Sano & Di Martino, 2003). Yet, relationships with foreigners may be affluent in many positives that contribute to individual as well as group and organizational success. Therefore, recently some authors have endeavored to explore what benefits can be attained from multiculturalism in a workplace (Rozkwitalska, in press; Stahl, 2006; Stahl et al. 2010; Stahl et al., 2010a; Stevens et al., 2008). This paper follows the similar vein, i.e. tries to examine the positive aspects of cross-cultural interaction in MNCs, which is the aim of the conducted analysis, further contributing to the literature that looks for benefits experienced in a multicultural setting and supports the value-in-diversity hypothesis (Cox & Blake, 1991; Jehn et al., 1999; Milliken & Martins, 1996).

The paper begins with a brief literature review concerning the "bright side" of cross-cultural interactions. Then the methods applied to the study are depicted along with the sample characteristics and the empirical findings. Conclusions that close the analysis come with implications, contributions and limitations of the study, while the suggestions for future research are also discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cross-cultural interactions. Cross-cultural interactions could be perceived from different cognitive perspectives. The origins are rooted in symbolic interactionism formulated by Blumer (1969). However, contemporary interactions could be identified both as an interpretative and functionalist paradigm (Sulkowski, 2013). In this paper the main emphasis is on the functionalistic frame, showing mainly the benefits of cross-cultural interactions perceived as a controllable psychological and sociological process.

Cross-cultural interactions are referred to mutual influences of individuals who represent different cultures (Rozkwitalska, in press). Such an interaction brings together individuals who have diverse patterns of behaviors and cognitive blueprints that help them to perceive and understand environment (Webb & Wright, 1996). Considering the context of MNCs, cross-cultural interactions refer to the contacts of individuals in every unit of MNCs' system, including their foreign subsidiaries and all stakeholders. The examples of such a contact concern working in multicultural teams (MTs), being a peer or subordinate of an expatriate, being involved in cross-cultural negotiations with external partners, maintaining working relationships with a MNC's other units while carrying out duties, business trips to other states, transferring knowledge within a MNC etc. (Rozkwitalska, in press). Culture can be defined as blueprints of all people's activities that direct them, the lens enabling interpretation of the surroundings (Luna & Gupta, 2001), and the collective program affecting the mind and therefore cognition of interacting individuals (Hofstede, 1997). Hence, human beings whilst interacting in a multicultural setting, "interpret or define one another's actions/behaviors through the lens of their cultures" (Rozkwitalska, in press).

2.2. Identification of the research gap. The relevant literature relatively widely portrays the pros and cons of diversity within a team (Stahl et al., 2010; Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Czerny et al., 2011; O'Reilly et al., 1998) without consistent argument which actually prevails. Cultural differences are one of the sources of diversity. Yet, diversity may be caused by observable attributes, the so-called surface-level diversity, such as age, gender, creed or race, as well as invisible characteristics that are described as deep-level, task-related diversity and include e.g. educational background, learning styles, problem-solving ability, values, attitudes etc. (Stahl et al., 2010; Hofstede, 1997; Yeager & Nafukho, 2012; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Nevertheless, as far as cultural diversity is concerned, it may produce different outcomes from those generated by other sources of diversity, as reported by several authors. Those authors claim that cultural differences are rather subconsciously experienced and although their effects are strong, they are not easily recognized by people (Stahl et al., 2010; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Lane et al., 2009). Thus, if the prior research on diversity does not allow for distinguishing the sources of diversity, its applicability to the analysis of the effects of cross-cultural interactions is rather limited and it suggests a significant gap in the previous studies. This paper is to fill in the gap by providing some empirical findings regarding the issue of the positives of interactions among representatives of different cultures in MNCs.

2.3. Theoretical background. The positives of cultural diversity can be inferred from the information-processing theory and the intergroup contact theory. Regarding the former, diversity of workforce can provide access to individuals that have different backgrounds, personal networks, information, experiences, mental models, cognitive perspectives, expertise and skills, which prevent group-thinking and boost capacity for creative and innovative problem solving (Stahl et al., 2010a; Stevens et al., 2008; Mannix & Neale, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Diverse individuals demonstrate more care to examine the problem at hand conscientiously, which creates chances for a deeper analysis and constructive conflicts. Different perspectives may further contribute to synergy and improve performance of a group (Mannix & Neale, 2006). It is worth mentioning that all the mentioned above positive outcomes are associated with deep-level sources of diversity (Stevens et al., 2008; Mannix & Neale, 2006).

With regards to the intergroup contact theory, it affirms that frequent and extended contacts with representatives of different groups foster changes in attitudes to people from an outgroup and consequently reduce prejudice. Nevertheless, it requires time for alteration in attitudes to develop (Yeager & Nafukho, 2012; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Turner et al., 2008). Indirect references to cultural diversity's plausible positive effects can be also deduced from the social capital theory. It indicates that if too much cohesiveness occurs in a group, it may cause rigidity, which impedes achievement of complex organizational tasks and hampers it to adapt to change (Stahl et al., 2010a).

Basing on the results of empirical studies, the value-in-diversity hypothesis has been formulated. It specifically links diversity with creativity and the theory of information processing. The hypothesis states that heterogonous groups may produce more views on a task, are inclined to more scrupulous analysis of a problem and, as a result, make better decisions, which raise process gains (Stahl et al., 2010a; Cox & Blake, 1991; Czerny et al., 2011; Mannix & Neale, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

In particular, the value-in-diversity hypothesis reveals its strength when complex decision-making problems are considered (Mannix & Neale, 2006). Thereby, multicultural groups that differ in terms of their members' skills, information and expertise may outperform as homogenous ones due to their potential for generating more alternatives that can lead to novel solutions (Mannix & Neale, 2006).

2.4. The "bright side" of cross-cultural interactions from the prior research. The research focusing on the positive aspects of cultural diversity has indicated so far the following beneficial outcomes of contacts among the representatives of different cultures, i.e. increased creativity, innovation and productivity as the consequences of learning opportunities, knowledge sharing, experiences broadening and adaptability (Stahl et al., 2010; Stevens et al., 2008; Mannix & Neale, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Friday & Friday, 2003). With regards to the latter, multicultural staff offers a better understanding of different needs and values of a client base from their cultural groups, which may dispose MNCs to be more adaptive and flexible (Czerny et al., 2011; Friday & Friday, 2003; Wentling, 2000). MNCs with a diverse workforce have also a chance of strengthening their competitive advantage as a result of cost improvements and access to the highest quality staff (Cox & Blake, 1991).

Moreover, in the recent studies some authors have also reported that cultural diversity may contribute to a more effective communication and satisfaction (Stahl et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2010a).

Regarding communication, it has been revealed that if multicultural staff takes into account the deep-level attributes of diversity, cross-cultural communication is likely to be more effective. In that case communication becomes a tool that fosters knowledge sharing and learning, generating more creativity as well. Then, interactions appear to be deeper, more effort is directed at careful explanations of ideas and thoughts, people put more energy into listening and providing feedback. Likewise, communication among diverse employees supports creation of social bonds, which in return increases efficiency of communication and consequently stimulates job satisfaction. Additionally, social bonds generate more trust in mutual relationships, which later improves communication (Stahl et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2010a). The above findings may also indicate that among communication, creativity and satisfaction there is a feedback loop that furthers learning and contributes to the process gains as well as enhances team capability (Stahl et al., 2010a).

Basing on the meta-analysis of the 112 previous studies, which have scrutinized the link between job satisfaction and cultural diversity, some authors disclosed that the relationship was positive (Stahl et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2010a). The above observation may mean that working in a multicultural environment creates unique conditions for needs satisfaction that are not met when other types of diversity of workforce occur (Stahl et al., 2010a). The authors offered the following explanation, namely satisfaction arises because in cross-cultural contacts people have opportunities for learning and overcoming challenges. Hence, if an individual successfully manages barriers typical of operating in a multicultural setting, his/her satisfaction may appear. Furthermore, efforts to solve problems collectively increase trust in cross-cultural interactions, which in addition, affects them positively (Stahl et al., 2010a). Consequently, contacts among diverse staff enable to fulfill a man's needs for a variety, personal growth and adventure, causing more job content (Rozkwitalska, in pres; Suutari & Makela, 2007).

3. Method and results

3.1. The details of the research method and sample. The empirical findings presented in this paper have an explorative nature. The study was carried out in two stages with the following methods, i.e. an e-mail survey and a questionnaire interview occasionally complemented with additional short face-to-face or Skype interviews. The primary aim of the research was to gain an insight into the positives of contacts with the representatives of various cultural groups at work, involving external stakeholders.

The first stage of the research took place at the beginning of 2013. It was conducted in foreign subsidiaries of MNCs operating in Poland. The respondents were asked to share their remarks concerning some positive aspects of their cooperation with foreigners, including expatriates. The sample was obtained from the previous research in MNCs that was carried out at the beginning of 2009 (Rozkwitalska, 2011). However, it was also extended in 2013 and additional 22 managers in 13 subsidiaries were added (Przytuła, 2013). The final sample was selected via non-probabilistic sampling methods, i.e. purposive and snowball techniques and was composed of 67 individuals. The majority of them represented middle level managers of Polish nationality (with two exceptions – from Italy and Turkey), men in their thirties. They had been working in various functional departments in their subsidiaries for at least 1.5 year (94% of the respondents had had a longer work experience in MNCs). The subsidiaries in the sample are characterized by a diverse capital origin and sector belongingness. The majority of the respondents gained an international experience by living abroad, previously working for a company with foreign capital, going on business trips to other countries or working outside Poland.

The second stage of research was conducted between October and December 2013. The respondents were selected via purposive and snowball sampling methods, i.e. personal contacts of the authors helped to gather the answers from additional 41 individuals, who experienced cross-cultural contacts at work. They had worked for MNCs for many years, a lot of them abroad. Most of the respondents were Poles, although there were also 5 Germans, 4 Americans, 3 Dutch, 2 English and an Italian. The men accounted for the majority of the sample, and the respondents' age was over 30 (with a few individuals over the age of 50). They represented various levels of managerial hierarchy, departments and MNCs with a diverse capital origin and sector belonging.

It is worth emphasizing that since the majority of the respondents had had international experience, it could have affected their notion of cross-cultural contacts.

3.2. The empirical findings. First and foremost, it needs to be highlighted that some of the respondents (including Poles, Lithuanians, Italians and Germans) had a problem concerning indication what benefits could be associated with cross-cultural interactions. For instance, one respondent ascertained: "(...) we realize international projects, thus cooperation is a necessity and obviousness. I cannot observe any extraordinary advantage of such interactions, preferably it would be sometimes easier to reach an agreement with Poles", while another one observed: "Most managers that I work with accept that the employers benefit from a diverse workforce. And there is a strong tendency to diversify project teams in our company". Notwithstanding some negative comments of the minority of the respondents, other individuals presented a more balanced view on cross-cultural interactions, yet the "bright side" appears to dominate their remarks:

"Whilst there are huge benefits of international collaboration and teamwork, working with people from different backgrounds isn't always easy. It is definitely the source of those difficulties that make those experiences very valuable. The more diverse an organization is, the better manager you become. More open, more creative and more flexible".

"There is a lot of racial and ethnic discrimination in the UK. You have to prove very hard that you are good. At the beginning you have to earn respect by working three times as hard as the British. Nevertheless, it's a great experience to be able to work together with people from several different countries, learn about their customs, traditions, religions. It is a way of growing, of developing oneself. All in all, this hard beginning is worth the experiences".

"Every single time you find yourself working with colleagues from a different culture you are likely to find pros and cons associated with the situation. What I love the most is the unique opportunity to expand my horizons, learn about new cultures, and create business relationships that span the globe".

Basing on the analysis and synthesis of the data obtained from the research, the following positives of cross-cultural interactions can be listed (in order of the respondents' frequency of indicating, including at least 3 indications), namely: 1) personal growth along with the development of social skills and improvement of language; 2) flexibility in working style, process gains in a group work; 3) learning opportunities, experience broadening and knowledge sharing; 4) more perspectives, self-reflection; 5) individual benefits; 6) communication effectiveness; 7) confrontation with stereotypes. The first category mentioned above, i.e. personal growth, was directly selected by the respondents, yet some of the remaining categories also reflect various aspects of an individual's improvements. Therefore, it may suggest that a development of human resources is the major positive output of cross-cultural interactions at work. It is worth highlighting that an individual growth as well as a human resource development as the positives of cross-cultural contacts have not been sufficiently explored or emphasized in the field literature and the prior research so far. The following quotations refer to the personal growth's effect of relationships with foreigners:

"Working with people is an unusually strong determinant of a personal growth. Working with foreigners helps to confront with the reality of our learned abilities".

"By dealing with people from different countries, because of cultural differences, you improve your negotiation and communication skills. (...) this experience can be brought back into dealings in the country of origin".

"Mutual interactions (...) are also an incentive in emotional intelligence building".

"The benefits of cooperation with foreigners include (...) overcoming your own limitations".

"There are numerous benefits. One of them is self-development. Moving offshore for an assignment increases your confidence, enhances your cultural awareness, strongly improves your communication skills and changes you both as a person and as a business professional".

"By working for such a diverse organization you develop not only professionally but also as a person, you grow, you change".

Another positive outcome of the contacts with the members of other cultures, flagged during the research, refers to increased flexibility in working style that may

promote better problem solving and enhance group performance (category 2), as reflected in the subsequent opinions of the respondents:

"One of the key positives is the exposure to different ways of approaching the same issues, problems and challenges. By working with people from other cultures we learn how to be flexible in our approach and accept the fact there may be alternative ways to address the same issues and achieve the same outcomes".

"The benefits of cooperation with foreigners are: (...) demonstrating different working styles, coming up to solutions (...)".

"I had problems with adapting to the German culture. There is no room and no need for improvisation. It was hard for me at the beginning. Now I understand that. Nevertheless, when something very unexpected happens, my German colleagues count on me very much. Previously they were stuck, they couldn't move forward, now I can say they admire my possibility to improvise and to fight unexpected situations. So I must say as a group we produce better results".

Additionally, the process gains can result from more effective communication among diverse staff (category 6), as it was posited by Stahl et al. (2010; 2010a) and confirmed by several respondents:

"Communication culture (...). Carefulness for clarity of thoughts expression improves everything (...). Courtesy is reflected in correspondence, you see attention to details. (...). You simply look for a common ground/understanding".

"While working on a strategy with a German person in Poland, communication effectiveness/ability to influence a German client will definitely grow".

"It changes the way you communicate not only with other people, but with the world at large".

Two of the categories in the respondents' indications listed above, i.e. the third and the fourth ones, reflect an indirect positive impact of cross-cultural interactions in MNCs on creativity and innovation, as it is poised in the information processing theory and revealed in the previous research (see the literature review section). The selected citations from the authors' study regarding the signaled issue are presented below:

"Working with foreigners (...) broadens one's perspectives and teaches to keep a healthy distance".

"You can learn from the experiences other people have in dealing with various situations. (...) Cross-cultural interactions at the business and personal levels enhance intellectual perspectives".

"We can utilize our reciprocal achievements".

"Cooperation with foreigners allows for recognizing views different from yours, validating someone's opinions, (...) it enriches your knowledge of the world and lets you adopt some solutions; additionally, it helps you to discover your implicit abilities".

Furthermore, with regards to creativity and innovation, one respondent noticed: "Diversity inside an organization unlocks and powers innovation because it creates an environment where "outside the box" ideas are common".

The respondents were able to notice the positive outcomes of their cross-cultural contacts for both them and MNCs, as commented in the citation from the study: "Positive familiarity with a cross-cultural work environment translates into your every-day reality (and vice versa)". Nonetheless, the individual benefits (category 5)

were usually associated with building social bonds as well as better career opportunities:

"The benefits of cooperation with foreigners are: (...) forging relationships, winning friends forever".

"Combining cultures often means understanding different value systems, providing a global advantage in your professional career".

Such individual benefits can be a source of satisfaction, yet this outcome was not openly addressed by the respondents.

The last but not least, in conformity with the intergroup contact theory, cross-cultural contacts in MNCs may enable individuals to confront their stereotypes (category 7) and as a result reduce their implicit or explicit prejudice: "(...) I guess that the most important positive aspect of contacts with foreigners is a chance of confronting stereotypes which are ingrained in our minds and concern particular nations and the actual representatives. Then we see that e.g. Russians or Germans are very likable and open people". (Rozkwitalska, in press).

In addition, the respondents indicated such positives of contacts among culturally heterogonous employees as optimism and self-efficacy of individuals, adaptability of MNCs and quality:

"Working in a multicultural setting makes you aware that only the sky is the limit".

"Cross-cultural communication promotes self-confidence in individuals because it empowers them with a sense of control over challenges in the workplace which were previously difficult".

"Teams with a member who shares a client's ethnicity are far more likely to understand that client than another team".

"Diversity translates into quality if a firm is capable of utilizing it" (Rozkwitalska, in press).

A part of the research was specifically aimed at scrutinizing contacts among subsidiaries' staff and expatriates. The respondents' observations suggest that expats may positively affect cross-cultural interactions since they possess certain qualities such as social skills, flexibility and international experience, which local employees can derive from:

"Expatriates are ambassadors of their corporations, they represent high presentation skills and personal culture that are over their weaknesses resulting from their personality traits".

"They have experience in work in various countries — sometimes they are our instructors and trainers in managing diverse teams in our subsidiary".

"They showed us how to share experiences among the company's subsidiaries in the whole world, how to build networking".

"They facilitate global thinking and implementation of simple processes used all over the world".

"The expatriates present high adaptability to specific local circumstances, which follows from their previous experience".

"They are focused on project and team management so their ability and will to build a positive communication platform is prevailing in their everyday work".

Conclusions

The conducted analysis, by collecting evidence of the positives of cross-cultural interactions, may contribute to the stream in the intercultural management literature that looks for the "bright side" of such a relationship in MNCs and supports the value-in-diversity hypothesis. Moreover, the paper focuses on cultural diversity's effects that seem to have been less examined so far and offers results that refer to the deep-level attributes of diversity. It especially adds to the literature on multiculturalism in MNCs since generally previous studies on this issue have been mostly concerned with MTs. Moreover, some findings directly contribute to the stream regarding expatriates. What appears to be rare, the study was carried out in one of the post-transition economies, i.e. Poland.

The research has exposed some findings that were not adequately explored in the prior studies, i.e. it accentuates such a fruitful outcome as personal growth, including the development of social skills, as well as sheds new light on the positives, while signaling self-reflection, optimism and self-efficacy as a result of contacts with culturally heterogonous stakeholders. Another contribution is that the authors examined the benefits of cross-cultural contacts in a broad sense, i.e. not limited to teammates but also extended to other groups of foreign stakeholders, including external ones, such as e.g. clients or suppliers. In general, the research confirmed most of the facts from the former studies of other authors with one exception, namely it failed to directly prove that interactions with other countries' nationals may be satisfactory.

The empirical findings imply that cross-cultural interactions in MNCs may be translated into both a company's and an individual's asset, yet they still pose a risk of being a liability. Which of the effects prevails depends, among other issues, on cultural awareness of those who function in a multicultural environment.

The analysis in the paper is also limited primarily because of the drawbacks of the applied methods to select the sample and collect the data as well as its explorative character. Taking the foregoing into account, future research is recommended to deepen the conducted study. Also the very methodology is expected to be improved, e.g. indepth interviews could provide more accurate observations and explain certain issues. For instance, further research should address the questions as follows: 1) Why cannot some people recognize any positive aspects of cross-cultural interactions? 2) Which actually preponderate in relationships among culturally heterogonous stakeholders − positives or negatives? 3) What determines their occurrence? 4) What are other benefits of cross-cultural contacts? 5) How does the context of MNCs affect external and internal interactions of their multicultural employees?

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