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Eliminating Intergenerational and Intercultural Communication Problems in Tourism and Hospitality Enterprises

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Abstract. Tourism and hospitality is a versatile and multicultural industry that comprises collaboration between members of different generations and cultures in creating and selling a tourism product. Business communication, including tourism and hospitality, does not refer only to business etiquette but is strongly rooted in culture, which influences people's interaction and way of speaking. Hence, intergenerational and intercultural communication problems are inevitable. The current research presents the main findings of an exploratory research conducted in tourism and hospitality enterprises in Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden in the period of 2020–2023. To discover intergenerational and intercultural communication differences leading to communication problems, semi-structured expert interviews with top-level management representatives in twelve tourism and hospitality enterprises were conducted. The paper analyses intergenerational and intercultural communication problems in tourism and hospitality enterprises, in particular those concerning the use of different languages and ways of communication to suggest means of eliminating the existing problems. The research findings confirm that differences between generations had an impact on the communication process. However, the cultural background and languages influenced people's behaviour even more, and a great majority of conflicts arose because of difference in cultures, not generations. Suggestions for staff training to develop their intercultural communication skills taking into account generational differences have been proposed.[1]

Keywords: communication, culture, generations, intergenerational communication problems, intercultural communication problems

1 The research was conducted within the framework of the NordPlus Adult programme project *NordTournet-3: Solving Communication Problems of Different Generations in Tourism Companies*, Project No: NPAD-2020/10015; website: www.nordtournet.com.

1. Introduction

Due to the spread of information technology and digital media, people communicate more than ever before in the labour market. Messages may be transmitted at any time to any part of the world instantly (Guffey et al. 2019). The use of various video conferencing applications during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed traditional work environments, shifting part of communication to online environments. Although communication skills have always been highly valued in traditional business settings, their significance has even increased recently.

Recent research defines communication as "a unique, powerful, and complicated form of human behaviour" (Waldron 2022: 1), "the exchange of knowledge […] enacted, narrated, or otherwise conveyed by rule-governed and meaningful symbol systems" (Gontier 2022: 619), "the act of sharing with others a certain content of information [...] to have something in common with the one to whom we address" (Matias and Cardoso 2021: 132), and "a process of sending messages through different platforms" (Kalogiannidis 2020: 1). Communication in companies is the "general process of disseminating or transmitting business information from one employee to another or from one business stakeholder to another" (Kalogiannidis 2020: 1). To sum up, communication is an ongoing, contextual, and symbolic process (Guamguami and Zeriouh 2018) taking place in a definite physical, social, and cultural context. The physical context refers to the environment, the social context is connected with a certain event and people, whereas the cultural context is related to a broad "set of circumstances and beliefs, which still may affect how we talk" (Dimbleby and Burton 2001: 21). Since the "context always affects the act of communication" (Dimbleby and Burton 2001: 25), the relationship among communicators is crucial.

Dainton and Zelley (2022) identify several specific contexts of communication: (1) the cognitive context (how communicator's thoughts influence the way they communicate); (2) the interpersonal context (interaction between two individuals); (3) the intercultural context (communicators represent different cultures); (4) the persuasive context; (5) the strategic communication context (attaining organizational goals); (6) the group context; (7) the organizational context; (8) the mediated context (the impact of technology on communication); (9) the mass communication context (the influence of mass-mediated messages).

Although previous research has analysed communication both in everyday situations and business contexts, communication processes in the tourism and hospitality industry, focussing on generational and intercultural differences in business communication in particular, is a less researched topic. Therefore, this paper will deal with interpersonal, intercultural, and organizational contexts, as it aims to analyse intergenerational and intercultural communication differences leading to communication problems in tourism and hospitality enterprises in three European countries: Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden.

2. Literature review

The theoretical framework is formed by theories of generational and cultural differences in communication, which result in intergenerational and intercultural communication problems.

2.1. Generational differences in communication

Nowadays, four generations are active in the labour market. Prior research (DeVaney 2015) explains that generations are defined by age, period, and cohort. Age is understood as a person's biological age, period is associated with events during an individual's lifetime, whereas a cohort is perceived as a group of individuals who have had shared experiences and events since birth because of the same global events they had experienced.

Howe and Strauss (2000) divide generations into the following age groups: (a) baby boomers, born between 1943 and 1960; (b) Generation X, born between 1961 and 1981; (c) Generation Y, born between 1982 and 2000; (d) Generation Z, born after 2000. This article introduces the main typical features of each generation to better understand the way of communication of each generation since they have an impact on how different generations "communicate in both reception and expression of information" (Jimenez and Ford-Wilcox 2022: 31) and may lead to communication conflicts.

Baby boomers, "the largest cohort of the twentieth century" (Beaven 2014: 72), are hardworking, responsible, observe instructions at work, and professional advancement is important for them (DeOliveira Lopes Melo et al. 2019). They are "workaholic, idealistic, competitive" (DeVaney 2015: 13), build good relationship with others and respect others' rights (Heng and Yazdanifard 2013). At the same time, they "tend to witness relationship and business results as intertwined" (Heng and Yazdanifard 2013: 837) and may ask the interlocutor some seemingly private questions.

"They will send e-mails or phone another person if they cannot walk or drive to that person" (Venter 2017: 498). They tend to print out e-mails and documents to edit them on paper first and prefer phone conversations when sharing relevant information found on the Internet instead of sending a link by e-mail to their employees or business partners (Venter 2017). They typically do not use social networking sites in the work context (Heng and Yazdanifard 2013).

Prior research views ***Generation X*** as pessimistic, individualistic, and self-reliant "digital immigrants" (Lissitsa and Laor 2021: 3), sceptical and pragmatic employees (Bejtkovský 2016) who highly value a "balance between work and life" (Heng and Yazdanifard 2013: 838). They are individualistic, do not acknowledge authority and hierarchy but at the same time are tolerant to social differences

(Mayer 2006). Although often addressed as "digital immigrants", they are fast at adopting technologies for both work and everyday life.

Generation X uses the Internet and social media regularly to obtain information (Rodriguez 2020) and share it with others. They also use face-to-face communication and send SMS (Pierce and Payne 2018). Since they highly value their time, communication with them must be meaningful and not a waste of time (Heng and Yazdanifard 2013).

Generation Y, also known as millennials, are confident, optimistic, multitasking (Lissitsa and Laor 2021), team-oriented, highly "value work–life balance", and "want to be happy in their work" (DeVaney 2015: 13). They can accept changes easily, including cultural changes, and do not plan long-term (Bencsik et al. 2016).

They use "a wide variety of media, not just the Internet. Diversity of preferences may be explained by multitasking as they can, for example, listen to music on the radio or watch a TV program while browsing the Internet" (Lissitsa and Laor 2021: 3). Prior research shows that their most favourite means of communication are e-mails, texts, and social media (Watson 2018). However, a difference in the choice of communication means is observed among the members of Generation Y with older members using both face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, whereas the younger ones prefer the use of electronic and digital technologies. They can spend a lot of time in communication using the Internet and social media tools, mobile phones, and Skype (Venter 2017).

Generation Z, also called digital natives, net generation, "live in a virtual and physical reality" (Seemiller and Grace 2016: 1) and are always online (Bencsik et al. 2016). Generation Z is intelligent, innovative, responsible, loyal, and open-minded (Seemiller and Grace 2016), but their interpersonal communication skills are not highly developed (Bejtkovský 2016).

Their preferred mode of communication is messaging/texting. They hate voice phone calls and do not like e-mails, as they take too much time (Seemiller and Grace 2016). Although most of their communication is technology-mediated, according to prior research, "83% prefer face-to-face communication and still find in-person communication valuable" (Seemiller and Grace 2016: 2). When communicating, they use vocabulary and slang that other generations find difficult to understand (Bencsik et al. 2016).

2.2. Cultural differences in business communication

Highly developed communication skills further successful work performance. Unfortunately, "people with different cultural backgrounds can struggle to communicate with each other, causing conflict and reduced productivity" (Trisasanti et al. 2020: 66). Cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal

communication styles may be a cause for intercultural communication conflicts. In a multicultural work environment, such as tourism and hospitality, intercultural conflicts are inevitable. Generational differences may even intensify the conflict since each generation has a different understanding of social norms and behaviour. Intercultural training organized at the workplace may help eliminate conflicts.

Prior research defines culture as "a collection of beliefs, values and behaviours distinctive to a large group of people and expressed through various forms of communication" (Dimbleby and Burton 2001: 261). It may be identified by nation, area, and religion and expressed through dressing style, art, and language in particular (Dimbleby and Burton 2001). Culture plays a crucial role in communication since social rules in different cultures differ and – as pointed out by Dainton and Zelley (2022) – intercultural communication takes place between representatives of different cultures.

Communication in tourism and hospitality enterprises involves both internal and external communication. External communication may be addressed as business communication, which involves "writing, presenting and communicating in a professional context" (Cornelissen 2004: 183). Malyuga and Orlova (2018: 3) call it "intercultural professional business communication" and highlight the role of "language, linguistic individuality, gestures, traditions, national character" (Malyuga and Orlova 2018: 3) in it.

It is evident, that business communication, including that in the tourism and hospitality industry, does not refer only to business etiquette but is strongly rooted in culture. Culture comprises values, traditions, beliefs, including religious beliefs, attitudes, perception, behaviour, and other components, and all of them influence people's interaction and their way of speaking. In the context of business communication, "language differences and cultural values guarantee the potential for misunderstanding and even failure" (Tuleja 2022: 13). Similarly, Malyuga and Tomalin (2017) also emphasize that the way non-native speakers use a target language is often a source of communication problems.

3. Research methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse intergenerational and intercultural communication problems in tourism and hospitality enterprises, in particular concerning the use of different languages and ways of communication, to suggest means of eliminating the existing problems.

In order to reach this goal, the following research question was formulated: What intergenerational and intercultural communication problems do tourism and hospitality enterprises have, and how can we eliminate these problems?

Twelve semi-structured expert interviews with top-level management representatives in the tourism and hospitality enterprises of Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden were conducted. Semi-structured interviews enabled informants to express their opinions openly on the topic and at the same time collect the data required, which resulted in a detailed description leading to "an in-depth understanding of a cultural setting" (Croucher and Cronn-Mills 2019: 117).

The interviews were conducted face to face, on the phone, or via video conferencing applications (Zoom, Cisco WebEx), depending on the COVID-19 situation in each country. Their total duration was 19 hours and 32 minutes. Initially, it was planned to conduct fifteen interviews, but since the data saturation point was reached, the interviewing process was stopped.

The interview guide consisted of five parts: (1) introductory part; (2) socio-demographic data about the participants and the data about their companies; (3) internal communication of the company; (4) external communication of the company; (5) different communication problems encountered in the company and their reasons. This paper will analyse the relevant data gathered during the third, fourth, and fifth parts of the interview guide. Prior to the research, the participants signed an informed consent concerning confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis was done applying qualitative content analysis using inductive coding with "no pre-set codes, standards, or expectations imposed on the data" (Croucher and Cronn-Mills 2019: 117). Categories were created and themes were identified.

The research employs **criterion sampling** (*Table 1*), which "seeks to incorporate cases or individuals who meet a predetermined criterion of importance" (Aurini et al. 2016: 58).

Table 1. *Research sample*

Code	Informant's generation	Country	Tourism sector	Work position	Employees' generations
GY1	Generation Y	Lithuania	Accommodation	Personnel manager	X, Y, Z
GY2	Generation Y	Lithuania	Tour operating	Director	BB*, X, Y
GX1	Generation X	Lithuania	Tourist information	Manager	X, Y, Z
GY3	Generation Y	Lithuania	Catering	Co-owner	Y, Z
GY4	Generation Y	Latvia	Tour operating	Managing director	X, Y
GX2	Generation X	Latvia	Accommodation	Owner, Board member	X, Y
GX3	Generation X	Latvia	Tourist information	Manager	X, Y
GX4	Generation X	Latvia	Tour operating, travel agency	CEO, head of the Board	X, Y

Code	Informant's generation	Country	Tourism sector	Work position	Employees' generations
GX5	Generation X	Latvia	Accommodation	Director	BB, X, Y
GX6	Generation X	Sweden	Tourist information	Owner	Z
GY5	Generation Y	Sweden	Accommodation, catering	Co-owner	X, Y
GB1	Baby Boomer	Sweden	Accommodation	Owner	BB, X, Y

Note: * BB – Baby boomer generation.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) owners/top-level managers of tourism and hospitality enterprises (catering sector, accommodation sector, travel agencies, tour operators, and tourism information centres/points) having at least two years of managerial experience; (2) five years of work experience with colleagues and stakeholders of different generations; (3) the company employs at least two employees from different generations.

4. Findings and discussion

According to our findings, certain barriers may hinder a smooth communication process at the enterprises included in the research. These barriers stem from "different cultural, economic, political, and ideological conditions of the sender and receiver" (Matias and Cardoso 2021: 137–138). This article will present the findings of the interviews concerning differences in communication, communication barriers, and different cultures.

4.1. Differences in communication

As described above, each generation has their own typical traits and value systems, which have developed based on some shared experiences during the period in which they were born, have grown up, and received their education. This has impacted people's behaviour and attitude towards others as well as their communication style. "Differences in communication styles lead to both lack of communication/collaboration and conflicts between the generations" (Appelbaum et al. 2022: 9), which hinders the creation of a quality tourism product. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the specific features of communication of each generation. The main characteristic features identified in the twelve expert interviews are summarized in *Table 2*.

Table 2. *Similarities and differences in communication among different generations*

Characteristic feature	BB	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Phone conversation	v	v	v	
Face-to-face (in-person) communication	v	v		v
Electronic communication			v	v
Record information on paper (notebook)	v	v	v	
Record information on the phone				v
Use of Anglicism				v
Difficulties in problem formulation				v
A good sense of communication style (formal vs informal)				v
Precise information needed				v
Observing hierarchy	v			v

As it may be concluded from *Table 2*, Baby boomers and Generation X prefer the classic way of communication, and face-to-face communication is significant. "Older generations like to phone or come in person"[2] (GY5), "Older Swedish generations are less likely to use technology and prefer face-to-face communication" (GY5), "Generation X communicate more by phone or face to face. They like to see, hear more, they want to know and understand everything" (GX5). In contrast to baby boomers, Generation X and part of Generation Y will first try to find information by themselves and ask questions to the point: "They will explore the webpage content, and once they have discovered some information they do not understand, they will discuss it over the phone or face to face. They will always call with specific questions" (GX5). Similar to prior research (Seemiller and Grace 2016), it was discovered that Generation Z enjoys face-to-face communication as well. Generations Y and Z communicate also electronically (GX5); "Younger generations use other forms of communication such as e-mail and websites" (GY5). Electronic communication is especially characteristic of Generation Z: "They tend to use SMS, e-mail, apps, or websites to book, which is a lot easier if there is a difference in language" (GY5).

Generation Y prefers direct and immediate communication (Bejtkovský 2016). The current research also finds that Generation Y customizes communication according to the interlocutor's age and experience (GY4), "support open communication" (GY4), often use informal communication, although "informality is both a strength and threat at the same time because it may lead to misunderstandings" (GY4). Generation Z has a good sense of communication:

2 All the interviews were conducted in English, except for two: GY3 was in Lithuanian (the translation was done by the Lithuanian project partners), and GX5 was in Latvian (the translation was done by the Latvian team).

"The younger generation has a very good sense of communication, is very much able to adapt to the client, they understand the difference between formal and informal use of the word 'you', because some like that face-to-face communication" (GY3). But, it has to be added that "Generation Z use Anglicisms, which other generations may not understand or accept" (GX5).

Furthermore, differences in recording the information were discovered: "Older Swedish generations [baby boomers] prefer information written on paper" (GY5), "X and Y write it down on paper, in a notebook" (GX1), whereas "Generation Z writes everything down on the phone" (GX1). The finding that Generation Z tends to record information electronically and transmits the information in an electronic way is natural as they are online virtually all the time.

These findings are in line with prior research (Lester et al. 2012), which finds that baby boomers prefer face-to-face interaction and written text, Generation X values direct communication but will try to find the solution by themselves to avoid unnecessary face-to-face meetings, whereas Generation Y prefers technological interactions. Beaven (2014) also shows that the choice of communication modes and channels is deeply rooted in the way members of different generations communicated during high school and college. For example, Baby boomers used to make phone calls and write letters, Generation X preferred face-to-face communication and phone calls, whereas Generation Y used instant messaging. Consequently, during adulthood, people prefer sticking to some of the forms they feel comfortable with.

4.2. Communication barriers

Prior research (Dimbleby and Burton 2001, Guffey et al. 2019, Matias and Cardoso 2021) highlights the following communication barriers: (1) mechanical or physical barriers; (2) semantic barriers; (3) psychological barriers. Noise, low-quality technical equipment, hearing disabilities, poor acoustics are examples of mechanical barriers. Semantic barriers are typically language mistakes – incorrect pronunciation, inappropriately selected vocabulary, grammar and spelling mistakes, unfamiliar words, etc. Attitudes, beliefs, cultural, ethical, and personal values are associated with psychological barriers, which are the most common problems in communication.

Semantic barriers may be caused by the vocabulary used by one party (the speaker) and its understanding by the other party (the listener). This problem is attributed to the fact that one and the same word may have different meanings. Furthermore, people's experiences may result in "different interpretations to the same words or situations" (Matias and Cardoso 2021: 139). Trisasanti et al. (2020) also mention that different pronunciation and accent are frequent causes of misunderstandings and misinterpretations in a multicultural workplace.

Semantic language barrier is one of the most evident generational differences in communication. "Lack of foreign language skills" (GX3) leads to an "inability to communicate accordingly" (GX3). For example, in the countryside, "most of the people do not speak English at all, or, if they do, it is on a very basic level" (GX3). Another example concerns the use of foreign languages by different generations: "a young person does not speak Russian, and an older person does not speak English" (GY1). It has to be noted here that historically Russian was a widely spoken language in Latvia and Lithuania, but since the regaining of independence, the situation changed. Younger generations prefer English, but a considerable part of tourists come from Russia, and there is still a part of inhabitants, mostly baby boomers, who do not speak Latvian or Lithuanian, or speak it at a very basic level.

"Another challenge is foreign languages spoken by employees" (GX1) and by clients (GY4). There have been situations when the informants lacked the personnel speaking a certain foreign language not so popular in their country but used by the clients: "lack of guides in certain languages; for example, a ship arrives, and we need twelve guides in French" (GY2). Informant GX2 has faced a similar problem.

Possible solutions to such problems are using a language spoken by everyone, if possible (GX2), using a translator application on the mobile phone (GX4), and since the communication is with clients, it is essential to adapt to their language (GX4). The managing director of a tour operating company solves this problem as follows: "Because we work in different markets and in different languages, we translate a lot of materials, so we can avoid some language barrier issues, which helps us to provide the service corresponding to expectations" (GY4).

Furthermore, grammatically incorrect expressions raise questions (GX2) and cause misunderstandings: "Communication is in English, which can lead to some problems (e.g., style mistakes, switching to informal communication, etc.)" (GY2). Another cause of language barrier is different, non-standard pronunciation: "Language barrier, especially with English-speaking clients. It is difficult to understand customers coming from India. They speak very fast; it is difficult to understand what is said" (GX5). These are semantic barriers to communication.

The next group of communication barriers are psychological barriers, including stereotypes. For example, "It is a peculiarity of Russian people that they feel that everyone understands them, including Indian students" (GX5), but it is not so. However, the informant concludes that all Russian-speaking employees can understand something in Latvian, mutual contact between employees is good, and "even those receptionists who do not speak Russian have learnt something" (GX5). Another example of psychological barrier identified was the staff's inability to communicate in Swedish when serving Swedes in Sweden, which ended up in a communication conflict, as the locals expected to be served in their mother tongue in their own country: "Some older guests show up and do

not speak English and thus are asked to wait so they can get a translator, and they end up walking off because they do not want to wait" (GY5).

The informants also face physical communication barriers both in internal and external communication. The two situations described by the informants refer to hearing disabilities: (1) "For instance, we have an employee who is deaf, so we communicate only in writing. That is a pretty big challenge for everyone. For a cleaning personnel, it is not so unusual. The situation is unusual on its own" (GX2); (2) "The receptionist also had a big communication problem with a young man who was mute and deaf and relied on his mother to do everything for him and expected Maureen to fill that role and came unprepared without pen and paper and always expected Maureen to figure out what he was trying to say" (GB1).

These situations were solved, but the situations are always specific, so each will require a different solution. Practising similar situations through case studies might be useful in gaining experience therein.

4.3. Different cultures

Culture and communication are interrelated. Cultural backgrounds influence people's way of interaction, which consequently may "lead to differences in communication styles" (Trisasanti et al. 2020: 67) and differences in perceiving messages. Furthermore, prior research (Trisasanti et al. 2020) has discovered that differences in work performance, expectations, attitudes, beliefs, and norms were the main causes of conflicts in a multicultural work environment since employees having different cultural backgrounds perceive them differently and have different reactions to the situation. For example, this may be attributed to different terms and gestures that may be insulting to other nationalities.

Consequently, this leads to cultural barriers. The level of employees' communication skills influences their ability to solve conflicts arising out of differences in cultures.

Tourism and hospitality business is multicultural in several ways. Firstly, it employs staff belonging to different nationalities and cultures. Secondly, tourism and hospitality enterprises collaborate with many partners in creating and selling their product such as: transport companies such as airlines, ferry lines, coach companies in their own and/or other countries, local organizations providing excursions and other entertainment at the destination, embassies to handle visas, etc. Thirdly, they serve customers from many countries, belonging to different generations and cultures. All these factors influence the work of the company, in particular, its communication.

The managing director of a tour operating company clearly highlights the above-mentioned: "We have clients from five different continents, and when we have to balance the interests of our clients in Australia with those from Brazil, then it

quickly becomes a challenge" (GY4). In the same vein, the director of a youth hostel provides a very good context analysis in the accommodation sector: "Our clients are citizens of different countries, from different cultures, different thinking, different daily life, and traditions. These are our customers, and, in a sense, these are our challenges we face daily. Each country has different characteristics, sometimes even in different regions of one country there are completely different lifestyles" (GX5).

The manager of a tourist information point located in a rural area has also observed cultural differences: "I am always comparing my work now with when I worked in Riga, in a big international organization and had been working with foreign tourists. Now I am working in a small rural area where people are shyer, I would say" (GX3).

These examples show that intercultural training is very significant for tourism and hospitality enterprises. Since in many companies the staff is international or the staff has work experience abroad, it is recommended to use their vast experience as a source for simulations and role-plays that could be acted out by the staff members to train them to satisfy guests' expectations. Prior research (Appelbaum et al. 2022) indicates that the main causes of conflict are work performance, attitudes, and unfulfilled expectations.

However, in the current research, the informants mostly highlight problems and challenges with customers/clients, not organizational cultural problems: "Americans sometimes expect more formal attention, elegance in communication, posher style. There are clients who expect to be asked with a smile 'Are your eggs correctly boiled this morning, sir?', 'Was your pillow the way you wanted it to be?' and so on. Polishing the details, I would say, that is more an intercultural issue" (GY4).

The informants mention the most common problems derived from differences in cultures that they have to solve: "The daily challenge is to maintain the cultural environment" (GX5), conflicts based on religious background (GX5), misunderstandings because of different ways of expressing themselves (GX4, GX5), different mentality and cultural traditions (GX2, GX4, GX5), different attitude towards elderly people (GX5), different languages spoken (GY5).

The problems that collaboration partners mostly face concern differences in attitude to authority and/or work which stem from local traditions: "There are those cultural differences where they need more authority, and there are cases when the things said by project managers are not enough, as these are not instructions from the director" (GY4), and "There have been some problems while working with tour operators from different countries like Spain during the siesta, when it is hard to get hold of them and receive any answer from them, or like in Turkey where they are not so stressful as we are" (GX4).

To sum up, informant GX5 concludes that they "solve everything in discussions, but most communication problems are because of different cultures, not

generations" (GX5). Furthermore, informant GX6 highlights the role of languages and culture in the tourism and hospitality industry for both staff members and customers. The informant considers that everyone should learn the basic culture of their resident country and also wishes to promote Swedish culture through an Instagram account. The informant is writing a book on Swedish culture "to put together all the important Swedish culture facts to help foreigners understand why Swedes act the way they do and to keep the Swedish culture alive and prominent" (GX6).

To summarize, the research findings show that cultural differences are a common cause of misunderstandings, but the enterprises have developed their own way of solving these issues, and establishing a dialogue between interlocutors is the first step to a good solution.

4.4. Training to eliminate intergenerational and intercultural conflicts at the workplace

"Social and cultural accumulations of knowledge are transmitted from the old to the young. Relevant information is accepted and utilized by the younger group, while outdated information fades away and becomes replaced by newer information and practices that are more relevant to their lives" (Beaven 2014: 70). Therefore, it is suggested to organize intercultural training at the workplace involving employees of different generations who belong to different cultures.

As mentioned above, it is essential to practise various situations that staff may encounter when selling the tourism product. Simulations, case studies, problem-solving tasks, and interactive games based on intercultural issues may be applied therein.

Several such tools have been created recently to develop learners' cultural knowledge and language skills as well as intercultural competence.

The EU-funded Erasmus+ project "Culture knowledge and language competences as a means to develop 21st-century skills" (culture-language.eu 2023) has elaborated six modules (comprising eighteen submodules) in ten languages in a blended-learning format (e-culture.eu 2022). The modules will be beneficial to increase learners' cultural knowledge and awareness and develop their creativity and problem-solving skills. They may be used for a group of learners or for individual learners as self-study materials.

The EU-funded Erasmus+ project "Language skills and intercultural issues in the hospitality industry: Unity in diversity in the EU labour market" (languages4all.eu 2018), besides other materials, includes an "Intercultural Module" explaining the theory of culture focusing on culture shock, behaviour and communication, culture and etiquette in a blended-learning format, and nine comprehensive culture-based case studies on hospitality themes as well as

tasks and a game for face-to-face meetings (esolams.eu. n. y.). The course may be used partly as self-study material, but case studies and face-to-face tasks should be implemented for a group of learners in face-to-face mode either in-situ or via a web conferencing application.

The outcome of the qualitative research conducted during the NordPlus project "NordTournet-3: Solving communication problems of different generations in tourism companies", analysed in the current article, is an interactive communication game, called "GG game", to develop employees' intercultural communication skills and get prepared for solving intergenerational and intercultural communication problems at work (Šešeika et al. 2023).

The order of applying the teaching/learning aids is flexible and depends on the company needs. For short-term training, it is possible to use some part of the modules and the "GG game" or solely the "GG game", which may be downloaded from the project webpage (Game 2022). For long-term training, the course organizers may apply the suggested scheme (*Fig. 1*).

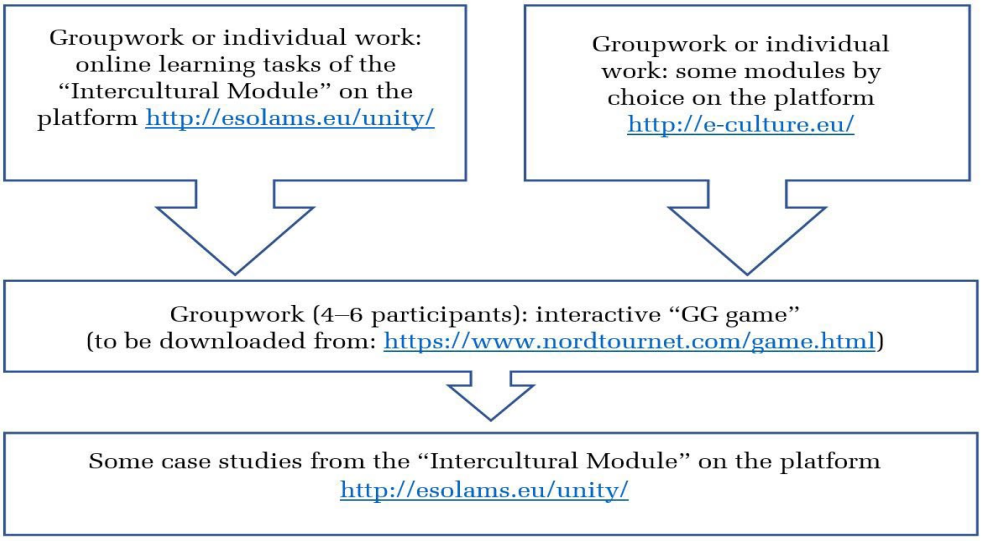


Figure 1. *The scheme for staff training to develop intergenerational and intercultural communication skills*

In order to develop skills to eliminate intergenerational problems, it is suggested to create teams of four to six people playing the game, by involving members of different generations in it. This way both older and younger generations could benefit from one another – the older generations may share their expertise with the younger ones, and the younger generations may show how the application of technologies and social media may help in solving the existing problems.

The peculiarity of tourism and hospitality business is that the tourism product is largely created by younger generations, but its users belong to all generations. A cause of generational conflicts between Generation Y – employed in creating a tourism product – and baby boomers – the clients using this product – is rooted in differences in the ways of communication and the use of technologies. Several informants (GY2, GX1, GY3, GY4, GX4, GX5, GX6, and GB1) pointed out the unwritten rule for hospitality – the client is always right. This refers to both different generations and different cultures, and empathy is important in securing efficient professional communication.

5. Conclusions

The research conducted in three Northern European countries highlights several intergenerational and intercultural communication problems that tourism and hospitality enterprises come across on a daily basis. The main problems refer to communication barriers, especially the semantic barrier, since both parties – the ones involved in the respective business and the clients – often lack certain language skills. This is both a cultural and a generational problem since, according to the research findings, different generations speak different languages. Surprisingly, it has been discovered that in certain cases tourism product providers do not speak the local language, but they are fluent in English, although the end users of their product are both domestic and international tourists. Another communication problem was caused by generational differences in communication with regard to the most preferred way of communication – face-to-face and phone vs. computer-mediated. This is not considered a problem in external communication since tourism and hospitality companies adapt to their clients' mode of communication, but it is a problem in internal communication, as everyone has to use the same communication channels to provide a quality product.

Although the research found certain generational differences that lead to communication conflicts, most communication problems have been caused by difference in cultures. This leads to the conclusion that it is recommended to have intercultural training organized for tourism and hospitality industry staff. Such training may be held at the workplace, and it would be beneficial to create groups of learners belonging to different generations to practise intergenerational communication as well. The provided scheme for organizing the training programme might be a viable option on how to learn about different cultures, practise solving various problem situations, and improve intercultural and intergenerational communication.

6. Research limitations and implications for future research

The current research was conducted in three Northern European countries – Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden. In the future, the research could be expanded to other regions of the European Union. Moreover, it would be useful to analyse the results of the proposed training programme after its implementation in tourism and hospitality industry enterprises.

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