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Rethinking Manager's Core Competence Paradigm by Integrating Intercultural Competence at Its Heart

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Abstract. *Manager's role has become more complex along the decades due to social, economic and political changes that affected business worldwide. This paper is part of a larger project to highlight the importance of intercultural competence as a core management competence in an era of globalization, workforce cultural diversity, international business, worldwide connectivity. Based on a thorough bibliographic investigation including books, statistics, relevant business literature and journals, articles, research studies, meta-analysis, mega-trends analysis, we demonstrate the need to review the most important management trends and paradigms for a better understanding of a manager's role along the time and at present and we bring arguments to support a manager's core competence paradigm by integrating intercultural competence at its heart. By direct observation and informal interviews with managers working in multinationals exposed to a multicultural environment, we collected and presented several case studies in our paper to show that successful managers should possess intercultural competency in order to manage cross-culturally for their teams' wellbeing and efficiency and for company productivity.*

Keywords: workforce cultural diversity, intercultural competence, management competence, management paradigm, multicultural manager.

Introduction

Nowadays, we are living in a challenging and rapidly changing world.

Speed, globalization, worldwide connectivity, technology represent now keywords for our lives and our work environments and styles. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 transformed business radically and highlighted more than ever that, besides technology – which helped us connect and maintain companies alive -, people play a key role in business adjustment and development, while also understanding the need to change or reshape their roles, competences, company policies, working styles or mentalities.

As the external business environment has dramatically changed along the years, by becoming more and more international and diverse, core management competency framework should be revisited and reshaped to meet the demands of our times governed by multicultural environments requiring intercultural competency at its heart.

Illustrating a brief overview of important management trends, paradigms and megatrends is necessary to bring into light how concepts and times are connected and how they evolved together interdependently as „a living body" subject to changes and external factors.

Having researched relevant literature, we explored key terms for understanding the vital role of intercultural interaction requiring intercultural competences and effective multicultural management for the company success and people's wellbeing.

DOI: 10.2478/picbe-2023-0034
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Based on direct observation and informal interviews, we presented two corporate case studies analysing the relationship between intercultural competence and business outcomes or behaviours.

Organizational culture, company policies, HR, diversity strategies, intercultural programs, cross-cultural trainings and workshops are part of a solution to consider or reconsider intercultural competence as a core management competence in the process of rethinking manager's competence paradigm, of profoundly understanding and systematically adjusting to the new realities of our multicultural era.

Literature review

One early step would be to provide a set of concepts useful in discussing and understanding intercultural competency as part of the core management competence paradigm. In defining key management terms, authors' goal is to encourage reflection on the importance of intercultural competences in a multicultural, diverse and changing business environment in order to create common theoretical grounds for understanding, developing and applying efficient practices to improve, train and consolidate the intercultural competences of employees and managers working in a multiculturally diverse environment.

Therefore, we shall briefly present some relevant aspects regarding the following key-concepts: intercultural competence and intercultural manager.

Intercultural competences

For a clearer overview upon the role and meaning of intercultural competences, we shall start from the wider concept of competences seen as a set of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours that contribute to individual and organizational performance. They are a key performance indicator and represent the language of performance management in organizations (CIPD report, 2021).

The concept appeared in the early 1980s and has been widely accepted and used in business literature and practice to reflect job roles in terms of skills, experience and behaviours. As nowadays the term "competence" or "competency" are interchangeable, in this paper we used them both with the same meaning.

Understanding the concept of competence is a vital prerequisite to understand managerial behavior and performance (Boyatzis, 1982), to clarify different management competence paradigms and to motivate why adding new competences for managers.

Research literature is consistent on defining this term and definitions include mainly the same keywords: knowledge, skills and attitudes, to which some experts add experience, intuition and talent for differentiation (Nichols, 2017). Other experts consider competences as "characteristics or abilities" that enable individuals to take specific actions for specific results required by the job in accordance with internal and external environment (company policies, procedures, structure / social and political community, economic conditions) (Boyatzis, 1982). In short, a competence refers to what an individual can do, not to what he/she does.

Managerial core competences are tightly linked to managerial performance as they are used to measure performance or to predict it (Bucur, 2012). Therefore, competency frameworks or paradigms focus especially on developing core competences directly connected to individual and company performance or productivity.

Boyatzis (1982) based his generic competency model of management on competency clusters (competency, threshold competency), avoiding to design merely a list of characteristics. His model is quite complicated, but it basically refers to planning, organizing, leading, managing,

motivating, learning competences. Later, Boyatzis (2008) refined his competence-job performance related theory while maintaining the same three pillars (individual, job demands and organizational environment) and competency clusters (threshold competency clusters and competencies differentiating outstanding performance), considering competences as a behavioural approach to emotional, social and cognitive intelligence.

Table 1. Summary of Competency Results

Cluster	Competency	Threshold competency
Goal and action management cluster	Concern with impact Diagnostic use of concepts Efficiency orientation Proactivity	
Leadership cluster	Conceptualization Self-confidence Use of oral presentations	Logical thought
Human resource management cluster	Managing group process Use of socialized power	Accurate self-assessment Positive regard
Directing subordinates cluster		Developing others Spontaneity Use of unilateral power
Focus on others cluster	Perceptual objectivity Self-control Stamina and adaptability	
Specialized knowledge		Specialized knowledge

Source: adapted from Boyatzis (1982, p. 230)

Based on the result of an extensive survey of management literature and on studying more than 400 managers activating in public and private companies, Whetten & Cameron concluded that training effective managers requires a combination of conceptual learning and behavioural practice, thus leading to a skill-competency approach based on developing competences in personal and interpersonal skills (Whetten & Cameron, 1984). In essence, they refer to stress management, effective communication, motivating, delegating, decision-making, managing conflict, etc.

Table 2. Critical Management Skills

1. Developing self-awareness
2. Managing personal stress
3. Solving problems creatively
4. Establishing supportive communication
5. Gaining power and influence
6. Improving employee performance through motivation
7. Delegating and decision making
8. Managing conflict
9. Conductive effective group meetings

Source: adapted from Whetten & Cameron (1984, p. 6).

Exploring core management competences, other researchers referred to strategic thinking, results orientation, influence and collaboration, team leadership, transformational leadership, learning, motivation for career (Bucur, 2012).

As managerial effectiveness is measured based on results and level of competence attained and applied in achieving those results, a successful competency framework will include results

orientation, business awareness, communication, customer focus, developing others, flexibility, leadership, planning, problem-solving, teamwork (Armstrong, 2017).

Also, a quick and empirical search on the first Google internet pages reveals that, when looking for „core competences for managers/leaders", „manager's competence paradigm" or something similar, all links direct the reader to various sites (leadership/manager programs, recruitment companies, LinkedIn, HR training programs, training companies and not only) enumerating a list of core competences for managers, such as: interpersonal communication, motivating others, written communication, honesty/integrity, project management skills, delegation, creativity, collaboration skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, critical thinking, vision, developing others, leadership skills, etc. Intercultural competence was not included in any list as a distinct core management competence, just suggested somehow (without naming it) by the „valuing diversity" competence, rarely mentioned, and generally perceived as encouraging inclusion.

In our previous study on the importance of intercultural competences, we revisited several definitions of this concept, highlighting both abstract, comprehensive and practical, general interpretations (Tudoran, Tudoran & Deaconu, 2022). Regardless of the perspective, a common conclusion is that intercultural competences are a set of interlocking skills and attitudes influencing people to deal with other people from different cultures (Brinkmann & Van Weerdenburg, 2014).

Meyer (2015), who is mainly concerned with cross-cultural management, perceived intercultural competence as the ability to decode three facets of culture and to improve the way people deal with them. The approach is based on "what we see" (perceptions), "what we think" (cognitions) and "what we do" (actions), focusing on embracing cultural differences and respecting individual differences, as both of them are vital (Meyer, 2015).

Discussing the definition of intercultural competence, UNESCO' s report (2013) referred to three fundamental concepts, specific of competence, in general, - knowledge, skills, attitudes -, integrating it, on a larger scale, in the same framework with other key terms, such as intercultural dialogue, communicative competence, intercultural responsibility, intercultural literacy, language, culture, cultural identity, cultural diversity, values, beliefs and attitudes, universality (UNESCO report, 2013). Therefore, understanding the concepts briefly mentioned beforehand and putting them into relation to one another could bring more clarifications to the topic subject to our discussion. The report concludes that knowledge, which constitutes the theoretical framework, should be both relevant and general, taking into consideration particular cultures and how they interact; attitudes should be open and receptive to embracing new cultures (together with values and beliefs being a key aspect of culture), including: respect, empathy curiosity, open-mindedness, flexibility, risk-taking, tolerance of ambiguity; skills should be directly relevant to intercultural competence and should include: listening, observation, interpreting, adaptability, etc.

There are many definitions of intercultural competence built around various concepts - language, identity, motivation, mindfulness, culture – inviting us to reflection and understanding for improving human interactions across different cultures (Deardoff, 2020).

Deciding on a universally agreed definition of international competence has proven elusive as the concept is underscored by several linked concepts variously defined in different activity fields (cross-cultural management, diversity management, cross-cultural psychology, etc.). Also, international business literature lacks agreement on what international competence is made up of, while in practice, the tendency is to include this competence in the brad coverage of workplace diversity and inclusion topic (Morley & Cerdin, 2010).

Clarifying the term highlights its importance and role in people's lives and work, especially nowadays in a massively interconnected and culturally diverse world.

Multicultural manager

According to Boyatzis (1982) who cited Appley (1969), a manager is someone who gets the job done through other people, contributing to "the achievement of organizational goals through planning, coordination, supervision and decision-making […]" (Boyatzis, 1982).

What do we expect from managers today?

To answer this question, one should examine the rapidly and continuously changing business, social, economic and political environment nowadays influenced by globalization, technology, diversity, workforce mobility, remote working style, pandemic or war in Ukraine. These significant, unpredictable and fast-paced trends, dominated both by challenges and opportunities, have fundamentally changed managerial work and have deeply transformed organizations (Caproni, 2005). To operate successfully in such a complex and ever-changing environment, managers must blend past and new behaviours, skills, competences and more seriously understand the larger context in which they live in. Caproni (2005) concluded that managers should acquire skills that enable them to be flexible and thoughtful, referring to lifelong learning and critical thinking, self-awareness development, building a diverse network of relationships, designing a workplace that motivates individuals and teams, creating a balanced work-life existence. It is interesting that mentioning the need for managers to adapt to the new global environment, the author specifies the skill the manage cultural diversity (not the competence) while including it in other skills (designing a better workplace, building relationships, communicating effectively). After the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, manager's role has been mainly impacted by the hybrid working world, the accelerated use of technology to manage employees and by employees' different expectations in terms of work experience, highlighting the need of flexibility and empathy leading to the development of a culture of acceptance and inclusive workplace (Kropp et al, 2021). Moreover, discussing the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have been focusing on developing transcultural crisis management models, illustrating that cross-cultural management competences are vital especially during crisis situations, as cross-cultural differences and intercultural communication can affect decision-making processes and managers should develop cross-cultural intelligence (Bajaj, Khandelwal & Budhwar, 2021).

Higgins (1991) mentions the importance of "multiple cultures" within organizations, integrating the concept as part of larger notions – managing organizational culture and valuing diversity –, not separately.

To understand why managers have to manage stability and change, collective identity and diversity, present, past and focus on future, we shall refer to trends or megatrends that changed managerial work and triggered new core competences.

Table 3. Trends Changing Managerial Work

Old	***New***	***Consequences for managers***
Stable, predictable environment	Changing, unpredictable environment	From routinization to improvisation, adaptability and flexibility
Stable and homogeneous workforce	Mobile and diverse workforce	From one-size-fits-all styles to multiple styles
Brick-and-mortar organizations	Brick-and-click (or just click) organizations and e-commerce	From managing relationships face-to-face to managing relationships

Old	*New*	*Consequences for managers*
		through communication technologies
Local focus	Local and global focus	From one-size-fits-all styles and standards to multiple styles and standards
Predictable, trajectory careers	Multiple careers	From employment to employability

Source: excerpt adapted from Caproni (2005, p. 18)

Visionaries like Alvin Toffler (1970), Naisbitt (1982), Thomas J. Peters (1987) predicted that accelerating changes in technology, communication, economy, science, law, organizational structure, industrial competition, social relationships, other global events will force managers to learn to manage in a world of permanent change (Higgins, 1991). As noticed, megatrends have directly impacted organizations and, hence, management and management competence paradigms.

Table 4. Megatrends

Changing from	**Changing to**
Industrial society	Information society
Forced technology	High tech/High touch: in a high-technology society, high levels of interpersonal relations are necessary to counterbalance the impersonalness of this technology
National economy	World economy

Source: excerpt adapted from Higgins (1991, p. 406)

As national economy was indeed changed to world economy and local focus became global, multinationals have been more and more relying on international cooperation and on diverse and culturally diverse workforce requiring new management competences. Intercultural competence should be a core one and managers "need to become diversity experts…" to manage relationships in global environment (Conger, 1993).

A multicultural manager is an effective business leader able to handle culturally diverse situations, people, teams while developing and enhancing their own multicultural competence (Caproni, 2005) that heavily relies on managing complex and uncertain environments due to the culturally diverse group of people whom they deal with (Lancaster, 1998). They also work on creating cultural synergy that blends working and learning from colleagues of different cultures and nationalities (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992).

Multicultural managers can make a big difference in the success of global innovation-focused projects and processes as they play complex roles better than their monocultural counterparts (Doz, 2013). They are more creative, subtly able to interpret knowledge depending on context and cultural influences, more anticipative in terms of cross-cultural conflict, inclusive, capable of mediating relationships between global teams.

According to Caproni (2005) an effective multicultural manager needs to understand particular cultures (culture-specific skills) and to develop cross-cultural interactions (culture-general skills), avoiding characteristics that inhibit the ability to manage effectively across cultures, such as rigidity, perfectionism, underestimating relationships, overestimating technical skills, lack of interest in working across cultures or developing intercultural competence.

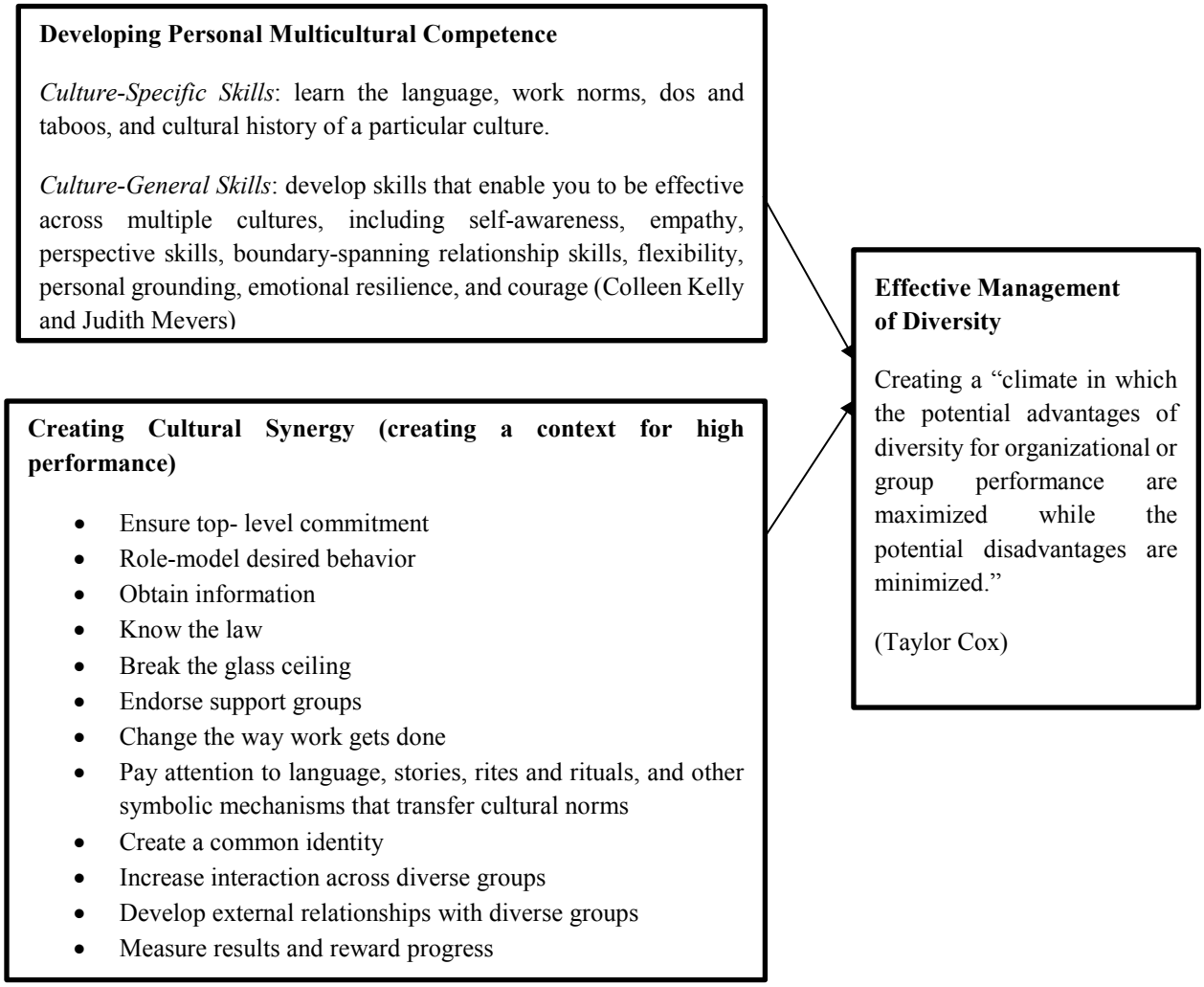


Figure 1. Skills for multicultural competence

Source: adapted from Caproni (2005, p. 293)

Methodology

We have approached this topic in three main steps, namely screening relevant literature on intercultural competency, analyzing employees' perception on this topic and interpreting all information extracted and collected in order to offer arguments for including intercultural competences in the very core of the manager's competence paradigm.

Firstly, we have synthesized relevant theoretical aspects on the intercultural competence and multicultural manager key-concepts, highlighting their evolution in time (meaning, role) and focusing on convergent elements.

Secondly, we have carried out a qualitative research on two major multinationals operating in Romania and worldwide. For this purpose, we contacted management – level employees and we had semi-structured interviews focused on the following aspects: the degree of subject knowledge (intercultural competences) , the importance of this topic within the company/team, the relationship between intercultural competences and individual/team/company performance, the relationship between intercultural competences and company business strategy, the people responsible for

developing intercultural competences, the current management intercultural competence level, intercultural competences and future. All managers interviewed by us facilitated our access to their non-manager colleagues who were asked mainly on their perception of the importance of intercultural competences, of a culturally diverse and inclusive workplace, of cultural differences, etc. Based on their answers we have presented two case studies below.

Thirdly, we have summarized our opinions on why we should consider intercultural competences vital for management nowadays and highlighted the importance of educating employees and training managers to develop it.

Case study 1: Intercultural competence and business outcomes

Delivering Business English trainings to corporate employees, I had the opportunity to work with a Romanian IT company, based in Romania and with offices worldwide, employing more than 500 people integrated in a hybrid working style and to investigate how they work with foreign colleagues. Teams located in Romania are made up of mostly Romanian nationality employees plus a few foreigners. The company has developed corporate policies on valuing diversity and encouraging inclusion, without highlighting cultural diversity management in particular.

I had the opportunity to informally interview one of my students, an IT manager with a 40-people team (37 are Romanian and 3 – of different nationalities, newly hired) on the importance of knowing how to manage other cultures at work for efficient business results.

The IT manager was very direct and prompt, telling me that he had no time to mentor the three of them as he was very busy (overloaded) and too tired. He preferred his time and energy to be invested in other urgent job-related activities and work projects. Other team members had the same attitude. Asking about how the three employees feel, react and perform within the team, the manager described the situation briefly: they were feeling isolated, alone, not very communicative (also language was an obstacle as they did not speak English very well), not very performant. But as they worked from home mainly (not too many social interactions with colleagues) and as they did not affect the general team outcome and performance, the manager was satisfied with the situation.

"What if you had more foreign employees within your team (more than 10, for example)? Would you do the same?", I asked. Without hesitation, the IT manager answered: "I would definitely not do the same. I would be interested in knowing how to manage them interculturally as my business results might be affected."

Based on direct observation and informally interviewing other colleagues, I concluded that they would not waste time in mentoring the foreign employees and they would avoid politely and diplomatically to manage them, preferring to use the internal chatbox application for clarifications or support. Their reasons were varied and involuntarily reflected their manager's attitude: the Romanian team didn't interact with the three foreign colleagues too much as they mainly worked from home; language barrier (poor English level in case of foreigners), therefore conversations were avoided or carried out with great difficulty; manager's attitude was copied.

As the team performance was not affected, no measures have been taken.

Case study 2: Intercultural competence and attitudes

Working as a corporate trainer with a big Romanian entrepreneurial company was a good opportunity for me to observe and investigate a very interesting cultural phenomenon, respectively lack of adaptability to a new culture with extreme consequences: some people left the company as

they found it impossible to face the changes and uncertainty caused by a new cultural and business context.

A Dutch multinational, employing more than 30,000 people across the world acquired the Romanian entrepreneurial company. Suddenly, Romanian managers had to work in multinational teams (face-to-face or virtually), to report to foreign managers, to comply with many new corporate procedures and policies, to participate at international internal meetings, etc.

It was a new working world and many employees left during the process, while others had difficulties to adapt.

One of the most challenging issues was the cultural one as some Romanian managers who were part of international teams acted according to the slogan: "One who comes to my country, one should learn and adapt to my culture, not me."

They felt unhappy, not understood by their foreign colleagues and could not deliver the results expected, motivating mostly different work style, procedures, language barriers, time management obstacles, project management differences, etc.

During my research, based on direct observation and informal interviews with the employees, I
aimed to discover what caused their inflexibility to change and their lack of desire to adapt to the new multiculturally diverse environment. The answers varied, but they mainly reflected some fears: to be perceived as not very intelligent if they speak English as their English level was not very good (therefore they preferred not to speak too much during meetings, appearing inactive); to be considered not as good as the foreign managers who had international work experience; to be seen as incompetent as they were not familiarized with the new procedures specific of a multinational. Others simply didn't want to adapt offering no reason except for the slogan mentioned beforehand.

I identified two main reasons for their intercultural incompetence: image and inflexibility due to uncertainty.

As image and the way people perceive other people are very important in the Romanian culture, a part of the Romanian employees chose not to reveal their poor English level, lack of their international work experience or lack of business knowledge causing misunderstandings and false interpretations: inactive, not motivated, not creative, not involved, etc.

Others were simply inflexible and unwilling to be open to uncertainty as their comfort zone was their ideal place to be in.

I observed that the Dutch company implemented some measures to make the business and cultural transition more easily: English courses, in-house trainings on company values, procedures, internal regulations, info materials provided, meetings, applications for feedback, etc. Unfortunately, all these measures were not very successful. Analysing the situation carefully, I noticed that there were two major obstacles that prevented many people from embracing the new cultural business workplace. Firstly, everything was carried out too fast for the Romanian employees to understand and clarify the business information received. It was too much, too fast. Secondly, everything was in English (materials, applications, company procedures, emails, meetings, etc) and their English level was low (starter, elementary, pre-intermediate mostly). English trainings were not consistent and they would often be interrupted, as many employees were not enrolled in the following module for the next level, leaving them frustrated.

Discussion

Both case studies are relevant to illustrate intercultural incompetence motivated by different factors, but with negative impact on people and their work.

The first case study brings into light that intercultural competence is still considered in practice a "nice-to-have" competence, not a core one, as long as it does not directly affect business outcomes or company performance.

As Stahl *et al.* (2009) observed there is no direct relationship between cultural diversity and team performance, only an indirect one, as it impacts other work areas, including employees' wellbeing, satisfaction, social integration, communication, level of conflict. Therefore, this "zero-direct-effect" might contribute to diminishing the importance of intercultural competence in management, transforming it in a sub-competence as it is mainly included in other management competences as previously presented (communication, managing conflict, motivating, valuing diversity & inclusion, etc).

However, companies have adapted to the new business, social, cultural trends by designing corporate policies that promote inclusion and encourage diversity, including cultural diversity (although without a specific focus on it). There are discrepancies between business practices and field reality. Therefore, organizational culture and training programmes should consistently support managers in their intercultural competence development as they also become influencers and models for their teams.

Education plays an important role in this process. Discussing main management trends up to 1990s, Higgins (1991) suggested that business education and business practice should be interconnected as firms must be able to compete internationally. MBA education is becoming "more experiential, more global, more applied", focusing on preparing the top managers of the future who should be capable to speak a foreign language and be familiar with a foreign culture (Porter, L. W., & McKilbin, 1988). As business schools have gradually changed their study curriculum, companies should also practically shift to the new trends, by providing cultural diversity trainings to their employees and encouraging them to pursue advanced business education. On-the-job intercultural learning – through direct experience – is equally important, too.

The second case study reflects the importance of attitudes in shaping and developing competences. A rigid attitude to novelty, cultural differences, learning and experimenting is not helpful in forming intercultural competences and surviving in a global business context. Viewing others "through your own cultural lens" leads to judging and misjudging them accordingly (Meyer, 2015). One's attitude should be open and ready to embrace multiculturalism in order to be interculturally competent.

A 2020 CIPD survey on resourcing and talent planning reveals that during the selection process, 36% employers prefer value-based interviews, while 33% still rely on competency- based questions mainly. The gradual shift to increasing the importance of values compared to competences highlights the importance of attitudes in determining, influencing and developing competences, as values guide or motivate attitudes. According to the same CIPD report (2020), 46% of candidates are more attracted to companies that include a diversity and inclusion statement in job descriptions or on career sites, while 52% of companies had a diversity strategy in 2020 compared to 37% in 2017 and 40% in 2015. Diversity and managing diversity can become a competitive advantage, but not all organizations are successful in their efforts as many diversity programs do not a have a real impact on employees' mentality, competences or within organizational culture, due to lack of good planning, cultural ignorance, reduced commitment to a multicultural workplace, lack of training or poor training, lengthy process (Caproni, 2005).

Referring to the 21st century, Caproni (2005) considers that social and organizational environment is increasingly diverse, concluding that there are many opportunities for interactions among individuals with different cultural backgrounds or history. Therefore, managing diversity is a critical competence.

Conclusion

This study aims to rethink manager's competence paradigm by adding intercultural competence as a core competence due to a multicultural business environment shaped by globalization, technology, global communication, international cooperation, workforce mobility and diversity.

Briefly presenting how the manager's meaning and role have evolved along the time, especially due to external factors influencing internal company environment, is essential for understanding why the management competence paradigm should be updated with intercultural competence as a core competence.

As global projects and multicultural teams are becoming a norm rather than an exception, managers should be endowed with skills and competences governed by interculturality. Formal education and in-company trainings should support the development of a multicultural manager paradigm. However, the importance of intercultural competences have been long ago understood by business schools that redesigned their course syllabuses, MBA programs or classes and focused on their students being interculturally competent for international competition and collaboration.

Gradually, also organizations have started to reflect societal trends related to diversity and inclusion and adapted their corporate policies and procedures in recruiting, attracting and keeping its diverse workforce, although there are still discrepancies between theory and practice. Efforts (not all successful) have been made to provide the employees with diversity programs, tools, intercultural trainings and workshops, cross-cultural events for a better perception and proper management of intercultural situations and work relationships.

This study has some limitations. We have presented only two case studies which might make generalizations difficult. Therefore, increasing the number of samples and reaching more employees will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and of the relationship between intercultural competences and work, people and business outcomes.

This study is part of a larger project to investigate the topic within multinationals. We are interested in discovering how well this topic is known and applied in the corporate segment, how companies develop a multiculturally diverse policy at all levels, who has the responsibility of implementing it and how it is put into practice, the relationship between employee/team/company performance and intercultural competences, etc.

Future research endeavors should focus more on how to develop intercultural competences and how to practically integrate cultural diversity within everyday organizational life.

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