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Parapatits Zsolt

A klímaváltozás, a világgazdaság és a klímapolitika kölcsönhatásai

Balázs István Tóth

Sundry Observations on Urban Security and Terror-Resistant Action Plans
in Urban Areas

Michaela Čiefová

Workspace – the Example of Austria

Antal Takács

Storytelling in multinational environment

Balázs Soós

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1. SZÁM

TARTALOM

TANULMÁNYOK/STUDIES.....	3
Gazdaság és biztonságpolitika: a kelet-ázsiai régió határainak formáló erői <i>Koudela Pál.....</i>	5
Gazdasági struktúraváltozások és válságok kapcsolata – különös tekintettel a posztszovjet térségre <i>Nedelka Erzsébet.....</i>	26
Sundry Observations on Urban Security and Terror-Resistant Action Plans in Urban Areas <i>Balázs István Tóth.....</i>	51
Perception of Intercultural Issues and Cultural Differences in Intercultural Workspace – the Example of Austria <i>Michaela Čiefová.....</i>	70
Storytelling in multinational environment <i>Antal Takács.....</i>	82
Die ersten Schritte aus der Krise von führenden österreichischen Unternehmen – eine retrospektive finanzielle Analyse <i>Balázs Soós.....</i>	100
KÖNYVISMERTETÉS/ BOOK REVIEW	129
Mi a lényeges most: hogyan győzhetünk a könyörtelen változás, kegyetlen vetélkedés és megállíthatatlan innováció világában <i>Parapatits Zsolt.....</i>	131
Szociálpolitika <i>Resperger Richárd.....</i>	137
ABSTRACTS IN ENGLISH	143

Perception of Intercultural Issues and Cultural Differences in Intercultural Workspace – the Example of Austria

*Michaela Čiefová*¹

ABSTRACT: Nowadays, the occurrence of companies employing people from distinct national cultures has become a common phenomenon. The main intention of this paper is to briefly describe the concept of intercultural conflict. Next, we attempt to find out whether employees at an international company had personally experienced a conflict, whose source could be assigned to intercultural differences, such as various communication style, perception of time and time behaviour or values. Since the company whose employees took part in the survey has its main seat in Vienna, Austria, one of our objectives is to explore the perception of cultural differences among national cultures involved, with Austrians being primarily focused at.

KEYWORDS: intercultural conflict, intercultural workplace, cultural differences, Austria

JEL Codes: M14, Z13

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that one of the consequences of globalisation is an increasing number of companies operating on the international scene. Therefore, it is obvious and likely that the personnel are constituted by representatives of different national cultures. This can make for instance decision making or communication processes more complicated. Not taking cultural differences into account can sometimes result in a serious problem, in a worse case even in a conflict.

In the present paper, we analyse occurrence of intercultural conflict at an international company. Furthermore, we intend to examine the perception of cultural differences among employees of the involved company, as well as characteristics, which are from the point of view of those engaged in the survey considered to be typical for Austrian culture. The author has

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selected Austria due to her constant academic engagement with this country and its culture, as well as due to its being an important trade partner of Slovakia. Moreover, the countries in question are neighbouring countries, therefore we come out of the assumption that intercultural encounters occur rather frequently. Hence findings presented in this paper might be helpful, for instance, when doing business with Austrian partners.

For the purpose of acquisition of relevant data, we elaborated a questionnaire, that was forwarded to the company employees by means of an online survey.

Objectives

The primary intention of this paper is to explore the existence of conflicts and problems emerging from cultural differences in international workspace, and thus using the example of a multinational company having its main seat in Vienna, Austria. Another objective is to identify whether employees of the company in question perceive any culture-related discrepancies among people in the workplace. Furthermore, since we predominantly focus on Austria, perception of potential differences in behaviour of Austrians and representatives of other cultures at the respective company is investigated.

The research results are based on the analysis of an online questionnaire distributed among employees of the company.

Literature review and theoretical background

Since intercultural communication has become a frequently discussed phenomenon and the scientific discipline is gaining in importance, a wide range of literature sources is at one's disposal.

Concerning Austrian-Slovak intercultural encounters, issues and conflicts, we can mention the book by Elisabeth Reif and Ingrid Schwarz (ed.), *Methodenhandbuch Interkulturelle Kommunikation und Konfliktlösung Österreich–Slowakei*, which on the one hand offers some topic-relevant theoretical background, on the other hand focuses predominantly on role plays aimed at enhancement of intercultural competence.

In the context of intercultural communication, time is frequently referred to as a factor with high significance. Gerhard Fink and Sylvia Meierewert (Fink–Meierewert, 2004) discuss time-related manager behaviour of representatives of the Anglo-German world in comparison to representatives of Italy, France and Central and Eastern Europe and identify several time and culture determined incidents, for instance concerning decision making processes.

Astrid Podsiadlowski, Daniela Gröschke, Marina Kogler, Cornelia Springer and Karen van der Zee conducted two studies focusing on analysis of reasons and ways how organizations approach and manage cultural diversity in workplace in Austria. Their research is engaged in approaches of organizations to diversity with regards to how these perspectives are connected to employing processes and management of culturally diverse workforce (Podsiadlowski–Gröschke–Kogler–Springer–van der Zee, 2013).

Before we proceed to the analysis of the research results, it is necessary to define the concept of intercultural conflict. As we consider this term to be rather complex, we include definitions stated by several authors. Generally speaking, conflict is found a negative phenomenon, which is present in every society. However, in opinions of certain experts and theorists, conflicts enhance creativity or stimulate competition as well as willingness to cooperate (Morgenternová–Šulová et al., 2007). Besides that, conflict can stipulate change and contribute to the maintenance of groups. It is an unavoidable component of human interaction, be it family, friends, or groups and organizations (van Meurs–Spencer-Oatey, 2009).

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel define intercultural conflict as the „*experience of emotional frustration in conjunction with perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in an interactive situation*” (Ting-Toomey–Oetzel, 2001).

Morgenternová, Šulová, et al. state that not every conflict whose participants are representatives of different cultures must necessarily be an intercultural conflict. We talk about intercultural conflict in a case when differences in thinking and handling of the parties involved are clearly to be assigned to their distinct cultural backgrounds (Morgenternová–Šulová et al., 2007).

According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, at the beginning of an intercultural conflict often occur different expectations regarding what kind of

behaviour in a conflict scene is appropriate and what should be avoided. They further emphasise that managing intercultural conflict includes appropriate, effective, satisfactory and productive conflict management and it emerges either on the basis of a misunderstanding or deep hatred. As for a workplace or interpersonal relationships, the majority of intercultural conflicts is caused by a cultural misunderstanding or ignorance (Ting-Toomey–Oetzel, 2001).

Varner and Beamer are of a very similar opinion, stating that within a team the culture is the most significant phenomenon determining the way people interact and solve conflicts. They summarize three areas of cultural difference, which are likely to be an origin of a problem. These are as follows (Varner–Beamer, 2011):

- *direct versus indirect communication,*
- *different attitudes towards hierarchy and authority,*
- *different norms for decision-making.*

In literature, we can similarly encounter a noteworthy metaphor comparing the three concepts – culture, conflict and communication – to the Bermuda Triangle. If these phenomena are not handled in an appropriate manner, a difficult situation may emerge (van Meurs–Spencer-Oatey, 2009).

Among questions included in the online survey was also one engaged in the participants' opinion regarding typical Austrian characteristics. The topic of cultural differences and main attributes of a culture is studied by many experts on the scientific field. Just to name a few, well-known is Hofstede for his cultural dimensions or Alexander Thomas due to his concept of the so called cultural standards.

Prior to the actual analysis of the survey's results, we attempt to briefly summarise the main characteristics of Austrians, in concrete by means of the book written by Richard D. Lewis *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures* (2006). When trying to describe a culture's specifics, the term values is mentioned frequently. Lewis names following values that may be assigned to Austria: „*hospitable, nostalgic, love nature, clean, respect education, hypersensitive to criticism, chivalrous, charming, traditional, old-fashioned, sentimental, romantic, Catholic, pessimistic, self-deprecatory humor, lack self-assurance, class conscious, stylish*” (Lewis, 2006).

In the context of individual perception of Austrians, we hereby refer to a similar survey conducted in 2016, in which the participants residing in Slovakia were requested to state attributes, that had from their point of view been typical for Austrians. According to the survey results, Slovaks consider Austrians to be conservative, friendly, proud, hard-working, polite, self-confident, professional, perfectionists, or hospitable. They should further have sense for beauty and arts (Čiefová, 2016).

Of course, it needs to be emphasised that we talk exclusively about opinions and standpoints of individual survey participants, the attributes attained to Austrians do not necessarily reflect the generally accepted characteristics of Austrian culture, and neither do the results of the survey presented in this paper.

Methodology

As for the methods applied, we had elaborated an online questionnaire that was distributed to employees of an international company. The questionnaire contained on the one hand multiple choice questions, on the other hand questions requiring more detailed, subjective responses, mostly derived from personal experience of the respondents. Based on the nature of the questions, either qualitative or quantitative approach was applied.

Altogether, the questionnaire consisted of 10² questions, with several aimed at participants' empirical experience with a culture-based conflict in intercultural workplace. Apart from that, several questions were orientated at perception of cultural differences, mainly with regards to work performance. Of course, we were also interested in the age groups represented, as well as in the proportion of genders, or countries of origin. The last question „*What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “Slovakia?”*” will not be analysed within the present contribution, since it does not completely correspond with the objectives stated, but will be applied to a similar research in the future.

Special attention was dedicated to attributes typical for Austrians, as for the subject of our research was predominantly the company's Austrian location (Vienna). Furthermore, a few questionnaires were distributed to

² Or 14 question, respectively, since 4 questions required a more elaborated answer, provided the answer to the respective question was „yes“.

employees in Ljubljana, Slovenia, due to their constant engagement with Austrian colleagues.

However, it is important to emphasise that our research was limited by the number of people employed by the company in question. Concerning the number of employees, the company employs in Austria and Slovenia up to 50 persons only, despite that they create an intercultural environment. The online questionnaire was filled in by 30 persons, mostly seated in Vienna, few in Ljubljana.

The company whose employees were asked to fill in the questionnaire operates on international level, with digital transformation consulting and IT development being its core business activity. As far as the geographical location is concerned, the company conducts its business activities predominantly in Central and Eastern Europe, but to their 15 worldwide direct subsidiaries belong countries and regions such as Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, the United States of America, Canada and Australia. Since the research is limited by the employees of a single company being considered, the results are not comprehensive, and therefore do not demonstrate generally acceptable tendencies.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, we elaborated several charts demonstrating quantitative findings. Other significant research results were commented on and discussed precisely, using qualitative approach. In some cases, noteworthy citations from the questionnaire were incorporated.

Main findings

Within the questionnaire distributed among the employees of the company in Vienna and Ljubljana, following findings were empirically identified. As already mentioned, the company's seat in Vienna and Ljubljana only employs a relatively low number of employees, our findings are therefore limited by a lower number of submitted questionnaires and our attention is concentrated on individual experience and viewpoints of the participants.

Altogether, the survey comprised 10 (or 14 in case of more concrete responses being required) questions focusing mainly on empirical experience of the survey participants and their personal opinions and standpoints. Among the employees who were willing to fill in the online questionnaire, the majority (70%) were males. As far as their age is concerned, various age groups were represented in the research. Half of the participants were aged 35-44. The second largest representation was the group

of people at the age of 25-34. The Figure 1 hereunder demonstrates the age structure of the survey's participants.

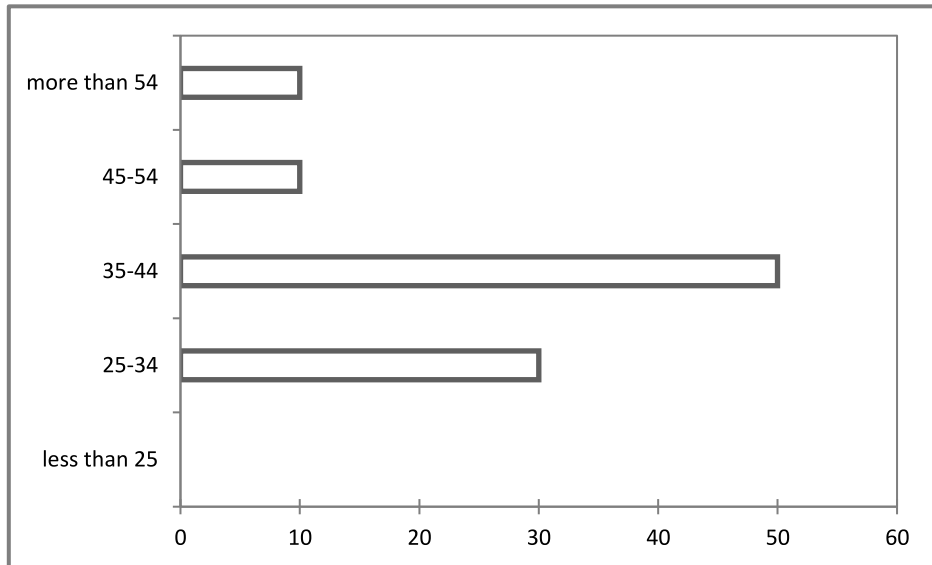


Figure 1: Age structure of the survey participants

Source: Own elaboration

What we find especially important and relevant in the context of this paper is the multicultural environment related to the employees' countries of origin, or their national cultures, respectively. These included Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Germany, Serbia, and even Argentina, and thus despite the relatively low number of persons engaged in the survey. We suppose, this enhances the objectiveness of the survey. As it is to be seen in the Figure 2, 40% of the survey participants reported Austria as their country of origin. Slovenia is in the second position. Other nationalities are represented by 10% only.

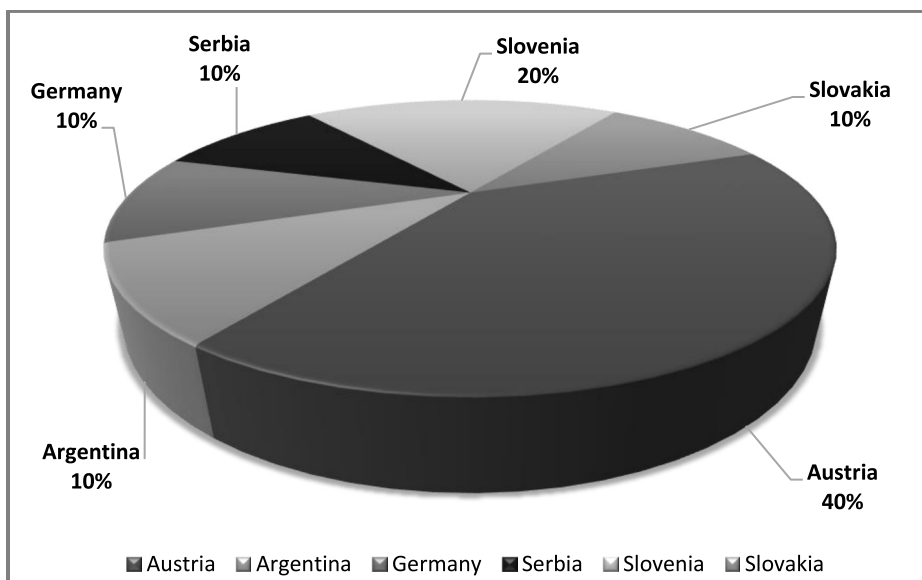


Figure 2: Survey participants according to their country of origin

Source: Own elaboration

We also found relevant to acquire data regarding the number of years the participants had been working at the company in question. With the exception of 10%, the majority of participants has been working at the company for less than 7 years, 30% of them for even less than a year, thus being the largest group represented.

To the question *“Have you experienced a problem or a conflict with intercultural background while working at this company?”*, the majority of participants (90%) answered *“No”*. One positive answer was further specified more precisely: *“typical situation of a strongly hierarchical organized companies vs. more democratic organized organization, which affects exchange of information and communication as well as loyalty and willingness to share expertise with other colleagues”*. From our point of view, the problem of information exchange should be emphasised, due to its impact on successful communication process.

In the case of the question *“Have you experienced a conflict with intercultural background while working at a different company?”*, the results were exactly the same.

Within the next question we strived to examine the perception of potential work-performance-related differences between Austrians and representatives of other nationalities at the company (“Do you perceive any work-performance-related differences between Austrians and representatives of other nationalities at this company?”). 70% of the involved employees is not aware of any differences in work performance attributed to culture. 10% of them does not know and only 20% sees a difference (Figure 3).

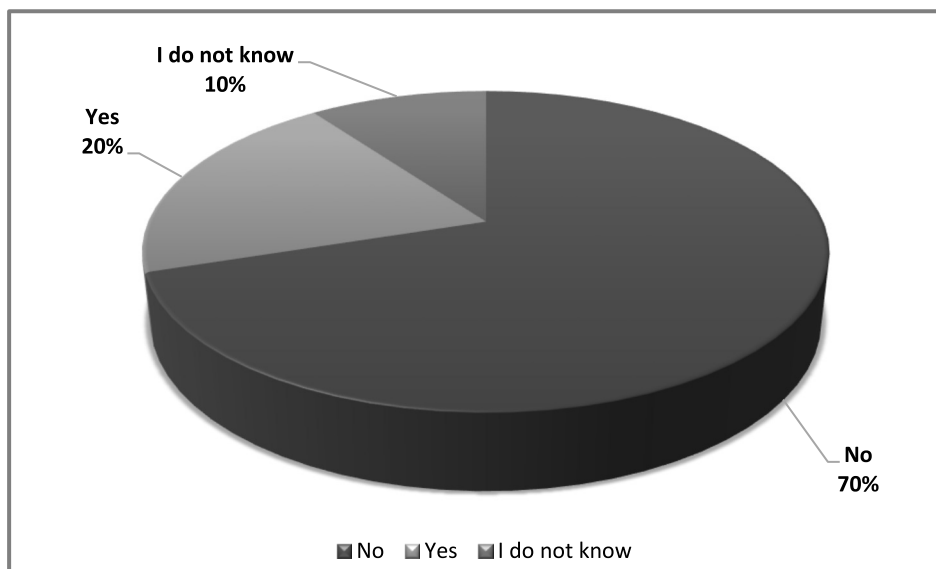


Figure 3: Perception of work-related differences between Austrians and other nationalities represented

Source: Own elaboration

When taking a closer insight, one of the participants described Austrians as possibly being more accurate than employees of other countries, assuming education is better in certain areas. Another response took work-related clichés into account, adding that these might not be performance-related, but concerning approach to work.

As already stated above, our objective was not only discussing work-related phenomena, but also cultural differences as such. Therefore, next questions were compiled with the aim of finding out whether certain general differences between Austrians and other nationalities are perceived and to specify them. The question sound: “Do you generally perceive any differences between Austrians and representatives of other nationalities?”

If yes, please specify.” According to 80% of respondents, several culture-related aspects, in which Austrians and other national cultures differentiate, do exist. Some have the feeling that Austrians seem to be more introverted and possess certain common characteristics with Germans, such as punctuality or the tendency of not demonstrating much emotion or following the rules. According to another comparison to Germans, Austrians are usually more flexible. On the other hand, in comparison to Latinos, they are normally more formal and easily to be relied on. In one response, the dependence on the type of the company, which the individual is employed at (or on the type of work, whether it includes intellectual or physical activities), as well as the level of education of the people involved was emphasised. The respondent also stated, the higher level of education we are engaged in, the less differences occur and people are more respected. However, they added that this might not be a case specific exclusively for Austrians. *“I can imagine the same relationship for instance between Slovenes and southern nationalities (e.g. Bosnians). Which is IMHO completely unacceptable, but that’s the way how it is.”*

Other aspects may be summarized as follows: attitude to work performance and work place loyalty, attitude to adopt to new situations and attitude to learn. Based on our analysis, some respondents believe that Austrians tend to be more structured, planned as well as precise with regards to execution. In comparison to Slavic nations, Austrians follow law and keep order in all activities in a better way. One response contained an even more detailed description of the Viennese, stating that the inhabitants of the capital like to complain and Austrians in general like to “teach” the others on the road. The fact that certain differences among various areas of the country exist was mentioned repeatedly. For example, differences between people from Vienna and from the countryside (Viennese are not that conservative).

Eventually, we aimed at finding out what characteristics were from the point of view of the survey participants considered to be the most typical for Austrians. To conclude the most common features of Austrians, in opinion of the participants they are polite, open, kind, hospital, punctual, bureaucratic, strictly following rules, homely, stubborn, sceptical, patriotic and conservative, while at the same time possessing a sense of humour. They are also able to adopt to new situations, even though they sometimes need more time to do so. They are as well seen as being open to other cultures and willing to travel for the job. Apart from that, law and

order play an important role. Moreover, Austrians tend to show respect to others, are good organizers and still are aware of the hierarchy principle. They are experienced in *“ruling the others (which I don’t see negative) and sometimes they are very good in finding appropriate resources to do the work, which should perhaps be done by themselves,”*. Several participants of our research pointed at existing differences among regions or towns also within this question.

Conclusions

In the present paper, we strived to examine the occurrence of conflicts with cultural background in intercultural workplace. The research was conducted by means of an online questionnaire, that had been delivered to employees of an international company with its main location in Vienna, Austria. Besides that, several questionnaires were filled in by employees residing in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Despite the fact that the filled questionnaire was submitted by the company employees residing in two subsidiaries only, a variety of national cultures was included. In concrete, representatives of Austrian, German, Slovak, Slovenian, Serbian, and Argentinian culture participated in the online survey.

It can be concluded that the answers to the questions regarding typical Austrian traits or the occurrence of intercultural conflicts were rather positive. In accordance with the opinions of the survey participants, Austrians may be described as open, kind and punctual people, following the rules and having a sense of humour. They should also demonstrate signs of patriotism, scepticism and conservative attitude. Among the answers, no strictly negative evaluation of Austrian culture was identified. Similarly, the occurrence of intercultural conflict based on the sample’s experience is a rare event. We therefore consider the research results to be positive and satisfactory.

We believe the findings and results of the presented research have diverse practical usage. First of all, they can be designated for managers operating on international level, or within intercultural environment. Apart from that, the paper might be interesting for scholars or students conducting a mobility in Austria. For instance, a person from a different culture may, prior to their stay in Austria, regard this work as illuminating some crucial aspects of Austrian culture and thus meaningful.

However, it needs to be emphasised that the results are limited by a relatively low number of participants and demonstrate attitudes of employees of a single company, hence no generally acceptable conclusions can be formulated. We would therefore highly recommend applying the same methodology to other companies, perhaps with a completely different area of business activity. Besides, also representatives of other national cultures could be involved in the survey, as their perception and attitudes towards Austrian culture might highlight different features of Austrians, or provide a new perspective.

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