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BARRIERS IN MULTICULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SLOVENIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract

Companies that work in multicultural environments face several challenges in their everyday business life. In this article we focus on the communication aspect of working in multicultural business environments. We test the hypothesis that companies that work in multicultural environments are subject to communication barriers due to different cultural backgrounds of people that engage in these types of communication. We test the hypothesis through a case study of two companies, one from Bosnia and Herzegovina and one from Slovenia, that engage in mutual multicultural communication. Through an in-depth interview with the project manager who takes part in this communication every day and a survey with the employees, we identify and analyse the communication barriers that the employees perceive as relevant to their business processes. We overcome these barriers through the application of the fruitful intercultural business communication model. The main contribution of this work lies in demonstrating the applicability of this model to practical cases and the demonstration of the fact that cultural barriers can exist and inhibit successful business even in environments in close sociocultural and geographic proximity.

Keywords: intercultural communication, business culture, barriers, case study

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Introduction

Successful multicultural business communication has become a topic of several studies in the past years, as more and more companies are doing business in international environments, where they are facing different cultures, religions and personal backgrounds of their business partners. The development of technology and consequentially globalization of doing business has shifted the importance in business communication towards in-depth knowledge and awareness of the cultural background of people companies are doing business with. Knowing your business partner, his culture, religion and national background enables effective negotiation and building of fruitful business relationships between the involved parties. However, not many companies have taken this notion on board, and is still dealing with communication gaps arising in doing business in multicultural and multinational environments.

One of the most widely cited studies within the field of culture and its effects on organisational behaviour has been performed by Hofstede et al. (2010), who studied IBM employees in different business units across the world. From his study arose a set of cultural dimensions that need to be considered when dealing with different cultural environments. His study represents a major milestone in cultural research and provides a baseline for the study of cultural differences between organisations. Similarly, the importance of fruitful communication between business partners has been subject of study of numerous researchers (i.e. Čadež, 2004; Jelovac, 2008; Jelovac and Rek, 2010). The subjects of several studies were the barriers to fruitful communication and how to overcome them. Empirical studies served as baseline for determining tools and models that enable fruitful communication in business environments. Several studies have defined new communication models that approach the barriers to communication in a systematic way and are aiming at building up a communication system that reduces these barriers to a minimum so that the information flows between the communicator and the message receiver can flow without disruption (Barić, 2012).

This article aims to apply one of these models to a case study in order to confirm its applicability in practice. Next, we want to demonstrate that cultural barriers can exist and inhibit successful business even in environments in close sociocultural and geographic proximity. The focus of this paper is a case study of two business units of an international company, located in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This study is of importance especially because the two countries used to be part of a greater country, Yugoslavia, which put them into the same dimensions within the cultural studies Hofstede performed (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Although the countries are geographically close, the presumption is that there will be communication gaps and barriers to business communication arising from the cultural differences between Slovenia and Bosnia. Additionally, even though the two business units are working towards a common business goal – successful business operations – the perceptions of how to do business will differ.

We will test these presumptions through a structured case study, described in this article. Firstly, a theoretical framework and hypotheses for the study will be presented, followed by an outline of the research methodology used. Results will be presented in the next section, followed by discussion and conclusions, along with some managerial implications.

Theoretical background

There are two theoretical frameworks that will be used for the purposes of the case study presented in this paper: the model of fruitful business communication (Jelovac, 2008) and cultural dimensions adopted from Hofstede et al. (2010). They will serve as the baseline in putting forward research questions and hypotheses for the purposes of the case study.

Model of fruitful business communication

The model of fruitful communication presented by Jelovac (2008) outlines 13 main so-called “golden rules” that need to be followed in order “to establish an effective, relevant and transferable intercultural communication in the global village” (Jelovac, 2008: 138). Then we have “to take into account the following necessary and sufficient conditions:

- In every process of intercultural communication, it has to be clear and distinctive which type of symbolic function is used.
- The use of symbols that have all their dimensions of meaning adopted in an international environment is preferable.
- Interrelationship between transmitter and receiver of value judgment exists in every process of intercultural communication.
- To choose appropriate value judgments for a particular cultural circle, by which the message will be formulated, we should prefer those which have actual, practical, and operational consequences that are conceivable and predictable for both transmitter and receiver.
- Every single symbol should have only one meaning during the process of intercultural communication.

- The more explicit and optimal the definition of the meaning of the greatest numbers of the key symbols, the more efficient the intercultural communication.
- Analytical and operational definitions have the highest informative value in intercultural communication.
- The effectiveness of interpretation of a value judgment in intercultural communication is dependent on the capability of the transmitter and the receiver to take into account the horizon of its context/discourse as broadly as possible.
- Every change or innovation of the meaning of the symbols used in the value judgments should be explicitly announced.
- To ensure the necessary invariant meaning of the value judgments used in intercultural communication, we should design the mechanisms for stabilisation of those value systems coming from different cultural circles (especially in the process of transition) which are changing, developing and improving.
- There are no right meanings, official patterns, authentic norms or standards etc. in any intercultural communication process; therefore, the horizon/discourse of pluralism is open for imagination, infinite set of interpretations, and variety of value systems.
- High probability of consensus and low probability of dissent in intercultural business communication is reachable by widening the scope of interaction between different cultural circles and making it more intensive.
- A higher probability of consensus and lower probability of dissent in intercultural business communication is attainable by including intellectual honesty and/or cognitive morality into the context/discourse and avoiding irony, cynicism, grotesqueness, contempt, mockery” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139).

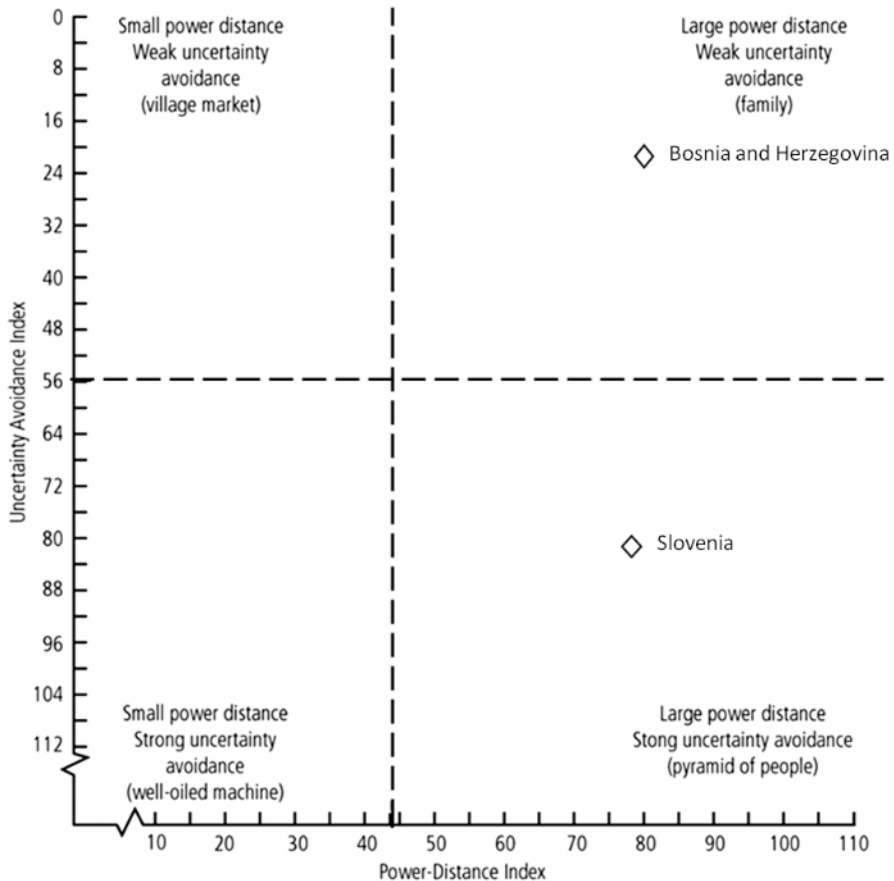
Special attention needs to be placed on satisfying these conditions in multicultural environments, as expectations of the people engaging in communication may differ due to their cultural background.

Cultural dimensions

Hofstede’s (1991) cultural dimensions encompass: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism vs. individualism and masculinity vs. femininity. These dimensions define a specific culture and consequently affect the way individuals and organisations living within specific cultures operate. Power distance and uncertainty avoidance in particular affect people’s thinking about organisations and working within them. Who has the power to decide what is influenced by cultural norms of power distance, whereby cultural norms about uncertainty avoidance influence

the rules and define the procedures that will be followed to attain desired ends (Hofstede, 1991)? The remaining two dimensions, individualism and masculinity affect our thinking about people in organisations rather than organisations themselves. The way to solve organisational problems within different national cultures should therefore be influenced by the levels of uncertainty avoidance and power distance of a specific culture (Hofstede, 1991). For the purposes of our study these two dimensions of national cultures are therefore the most relevant, since the presented case study deals with organisations, functioning under specific rules in order to perform a task/solve a specific problem. When the majority of Hofstede's work was carried out, the two countries that are part of our case study – Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – were still part of the same country – Yugoslavia – therefore the indexes for their uncertainty avoidance levels and power distance levels are mapped out as the same. When Yugoslavia split, several studies were however carried out (e.g. Hrnjičić, 2011) to determine if the newly established countries actually fall within the same cultural dimensions as defined by Hofstede et al. (2010).

Figure 1: Positions of the studied countries within the Power Distance/Uncertainty Avoidance Matrix (adapted from Hofstede, 2010 and Hrnjicic, 2011).



The indexes obtained from these studies will serve to place the two studied countries within the cultural clusters outlined by Hofstede et al. (2010) who define several clusters of national cultures according to their index scores within the power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions. The national cultures studied within our case fall into two of these clusters: “pyramid of people” and “family”. These two clusters differ according to the studied dimensions, i.e. “pyramid of people” type of national cultures are strongly oriented towards collectivism and have high power distance and uncertainty avoidance levels within their culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). These characteristics put them opposite to the “family” type of national culture where the orientation is still highly collectivist, the levels of power distance are high, but uncertainty

avoidance is low. Where Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been placed within the mentioned clusters can be seen from Figure 1. The figure confirms that major emphasis should be placed on culture when entering into mutual business communications between the two countries.

Hypothesis and case study

As mentioned in the Introduction, the case study will be carried out within two business units of an international company, one based in Slovenia and the other in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although part of the same group, the two companies operate in two different countries as two separate, mostly independent units and will be treated as such in this case study. On the basis of the conditions that need to be fulfilled for fruitful communication and the fact that the two studied countries fall within two different cultural clusters, with regard to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, we hypothesize that there will be communication barriers between the employees of the two business units. The hypothesis we will test is as follows:

H1: The communication barriers between the employees of the two business units will arise from cultural differences between the two studied countries.

To test the hypothesis, the research protocol incorporated two separate research methods. An in-depth interview was carried out with the project manager, who is responsible to manage and administer projects in both business units. Additionally a short survey was carried out with 16 employees of both units. These employees were chosen to be part of the study as they are all involved in the multicultural business communication between the two business units.

Cultural background of the two studied countries

Doing business between Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has played a major part for businesses from both countries even before Yugoslavia split. As attitudes in Yugoslavia towards national differences between its federal units named republics was different (brotherhood and unity played a major role in Yugoslav communication and business environment), no major emphasis was placed on cultural differences between people. With the split of Yugoslavia, which was mostly attributed to these differences, studies of cultural relevance have been conducted within and between the former Yugoslav republics. We summarise some of them here, to show why an emphasis on tailoring

communication between businesses of both countries should be considered important.

The culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina was mostly influenced by the Turks, especially in terms of religion: 43% of inhabitants consider themselves Muslim (Natek and Natek, 1999), which puts them quite opposite Slovenia, where Muslim religion is relatively scarcely represented.

As indicated by Savšek (2008) the traditional habits in Bosnia and Herzegovina include:

- Marriage and funerals
 - Celebrating Ramadan
 - No alcohol and pork
 - The ritual of drinking coffee (a lot of business decisions are made during coffee time)
 - Punctuality is not a virtue (even in business world it is not considered to be rude, if one is a bit late)
 - The greeting handshake is accompanied by two kisses to both cheeks
-
- On the contrary, Slovenians are often classified (if not even stereotyped) as (Musek, 1999):
 - Well behaved, disciplined and hard working
 - Introvert, sometimes depressed about own self
 - Driven towards conflict and hard stance (not willing to let go of own will/ idea/ perception).

One of the major differences between the countries is the level of individualism, which has had a major rise in Slovenia after it became independent, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina is still considered to be quite a collectivist country.

The company, the business units and employees

The Slovenian company named X is the parent company and has the majority share in the Bosnian business unit Y. The main business of the two business units includes hotels, restaurants, health and spa services, sport trade and other activities. On 31st December 2011 there were 449 employees working for company X and 29 working for company Y. The official language in the company is Slovenian.

There are 12 employees in company X that are in regular contact with 5 of the employees of company Y and are therefore engaging in

multicultural business communication. The project manager that is employed by company X is the line manager of all 16 employees that are part of this study as they are the participants in the multicultural communication between the two businesses. Table 1 summarizes some of the cultural aspects relevant to both businesses that have been identified by the project manager as having influence on the way business is done.

Table 1: Some aspects of cultural differences between companies X and Y as seen by the project manager

Hofstede's cultural dimension	Company X	Company Y
Power distance	High supervision levels (i.e. if a mistake was made by someone at the basic level it is cascaded all the way to the top management)	Low level of supervision. The employees are stating their opinions and the opinions are also heard.
Uncertainty avoidance	Ideas of others are not wanted. The system is not open to change.	New ideas are wanted and always listened to.
Masculinity-femininity	Respect towards men is higher than towards women.	Employees have no problems with the fact that the project manager is a woman.
Long term – short term orientation		Tradition and religion are of high importance.
Indulgence vs. restraint	Resentfulness	Openness, positive attitude, everything can be done attitude.

The outlined aspects are in line with where the two countries were placed within the clusters in Figure 1.

Survey and interview results

The case study is based on a questionnaire survey that was handed out to all 16 employees that engage in the multicultural business communications in both companies. 7 employees from X and 4 from Y responded and returned the questionnaire, thus giving an effective

response rate of 68.75%. Out of the respondents 7 were women and 4 were men, with an average employment status of 6.9 years. The educational level is higher in Slovenian unit, as all respondents have at least a university degree.

Due to a very small sample size an additional in-depth interview was conducted with the project manager that deals with all the employees that were given the questionnaire. The questionnaire questions can be found in Barić (2012) and are structured to determine if there are cultural barriers in business communication between the two businesses. Questions related to the educational structure of the respondents, their religious background and the managerial level they hold within the company were also asked. The interview with the project manager was of an open nature, with a limited number of pre-prepared questions. The decision to approach the interview in this manner came from the fact that in this way, a more open discussion about the way communication is handled in the business can be gained. The interview findings serve as support material to the initial questionnaire.

The data gathered showed that:

- Slovenian respondents put a greater emphasis on the barriers in multicultural communication than the Bosnian respondents (over 40% of respondents from the Slovenian unit find communication barriers to be an important issue in multicultural communication, whereas all the Bosnian respondents feel they are irrelevant)
- Bosnian respondents feel that the international environment does not affect their daily business.

To determine if the studied concepts are correlated a correlation analysis was performed in SPSS. An interesting finding that arose from this analysis was that the respondents with lower educational levels perceive the decision making process to be centralized in the business unit, whereas the more educated employees assign the decision making to the parent company (Pearson's $r = .937$). Furthermore, all the employees that perceive the decision making process to be centralised in the business unit are employed in the Bosnian business (see Table 2 for details). We presume that although the employees in the Bosnian business are in contact with the Slovenian business, all the relevant decisions are communicated from the top management within the unit, thus such a perception.

Table 2: Perception of where decisions are made in relation to the educational background of the employees

	Decision making		Total		
	Centralised in parent company	Centralised in business unit			
Education level	Lower than any stated	Count	0 .0%	2 100.0%	2 100.0%
	Bologna 1	Count	1 100.0%	0 .0%	1 100.0%
	Bologna 2	Count	6 100.0%	0 .0%	6 100.0%
	Masters	Count	1 100.0%	0 .0%	1 100.0%
Total		Count	8 80.0%	2 20.0%	10 100.0%

Another relevant correlation arose when analysing the perceptions people have of others with regard to their religion/nationality/culture in private life and business communication. As Table 3 shows ($r = .624$), people who do not assign relevance to cultural/religious/ national background of people in private life, do not do so in business communication either.

Table 3: Perception of people in private and business communication

			Perception of business partners		Total
			As individuals	None of the above	
Socialising with people of different cultures etc.	yes	Count	7 100.0%	0 .0%	7 100.0%
	Information on religion etc. doesn't interest me	Count	2 50.0%	2 50.0%	4 100.0%
Total		Count	9 81.8%	2 18.2%	11 100.0%

The most important notion however came out of correlations between the managerial level of the employees and their perception of cultural differences of employees participating in multicultural communication. As Table 4 shows that the top management is aware of the cultural differences between the employees they are engaging with in daily business, whereas the functions that are working in operations management are not giving this importance, as they either are not aware of the differences in cultures or just do not care about them ($r = .671$).

Table 4: The relationship between the managerial levels of the employees and their perception of cultural differences between employees

			Employees come from different cultures		Total
			yes	Don't know	
Managerial level	Top management	Count	4 100.0%	0 .0%	4 100.0%
	Middle management	Count	3 100.0%	0 .0%	3 100.0%
	Operations management	Count	1 100.0%	0 .0%	1 100.0%
	None of the above	Count	1 33.3%	2 66.7%	3 100.0%
Total		Count	9 81.8%	2 18.2%	11 100.0%

As can be seen from the outlined analysis, only Slovenian respondents actually perceive the differences in culture as having an effect on their business communication. Why this is the case can be drawn from the cultural differences between the two businesses. Bosnian respondents are not aware of the cultural barriers in communication and find them irrelevant, which is in line with the culture of “Family”, as defined by Hofstede et al. (2010). The major characteristic of such cultures is that they are not avoiding uncertainty, which is definitely brought by communication barriers and are solving these barriers ad hoc, without actually using any structured mechanisms for dealing with them. On the

other hand, the Slovenian respondents acknowledge that there are cultural differences present in their daily business communication. Slovenian culture has a high level of uncertainty avoidance, along with high levels of power distance, which would consequently mean that the employees are keen on solving the problems/barriers in a structured, formal way, which puts them opposite the Bosnian culture.

These findings were supported by the results from the interview with the project manager. An interesting notion that she put forward was that the communication is actually done in some form of Bosnian language; although the company's official language is Slovenian. Slovenian respondents were taught Serbo-Croatian in school, whereas Bosnian respondents never encountered Slovenian in their schools and are thus not able to communicate in Slovenian. The project manager acknowledged that Bosnian language is different from what the Slovenian employees were taught in school under Serbo-Croatian, thus a barrier is present in this sense. She also outlined who communicates with whom in the daily business and mentioned that there is limited day-to-day contact between all the employees, thus there is a low level of relationship built between the two businesses. The major means of communication are the phone, email, Skype, and rarely personal meetings. She also mentioned the cultural shock she got when first starting to deal with the business unit in Bosnia. She mentioned the need to get accustomed to the food (no pork and alcohol) and especially the openness of people. Everything is done with less hierarchy in Y, whereas in X the employees are strict, formal and follow their procedures. The employees of Y are also more responsive to communications, as she mentioned she always gets a response from Y, whereas in X the response rate to emails or other means of communication is around 20%. She mentioned some mechanisms to overcome such barriers, e.g. social gatherings and training.

Applying the model of fruitful communication

Although the findings come from a small sample and a subjective view of the project manager, they give enough information to acknowledge that there are cultural barriers that need to be dealt with for the two businesses to cooperate and communicate effectively. To overcome these barriers, the model of fruitful business communication (Jelovac, 2008; Jelovac and Rek, 2010) will be applied.

Ad (i) As already mentioned above, the first principle of the Jelovac model stated that "in every process of intercultural communication, it has to be clear and distinctive which type of symbolic function is used" (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). Therefore, it is especially important in the

case of studied companies that a clear distinction is made between business and social communications between the two companies. Bosnian business employs people who are more relaxed, open and sociable, whereas employees of the Slovenian business are keen on formal communication, formal delegation and decision-making without any social contact between employees. It is also important to agree on common symbolic functions to be used and understood by both sides. Employees have to communicate in the same official business context without mixing it with private, chat, informal, religious etc. communication.

Ad (ii) The second rule of the model suggests that it is preferable to “use of symbols that have all their dimensions of meaning adopted in an international environment” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). Consequently, this requires not using symbols that come out of local contexts such as slang words or symbols that have a specific connotation which could only be understood within the discourse of a specific worldview, ideology, religion and/or subculture. For example, the project manager described her own culture shock when visiting the branch in Bosnia and Herzegovina and being confronted with the regional cultural fact that the consumption of alcohol and pork is not acceptable. Hence, the primary responsibility of all staff involved in intercultural communication must be to gain knowledge of the symbolic dimension of culture with which they communicate and to find a balance between their own beliefs and the beliefs of the culture they are communicating with. Although Company X has learned from the experiences with Company Y and has adapted to the cultural aspects relevant to their mutual business communication, this needs to be done on both sides. Employees in Company Y must accept and adapt to the tendency of employees from X to separate business and social life. It also seems important to build on the education and erudition of employees in Y in order to eliminate obstacles related to the continuum of "East-West".

Ad (iii) Doing business in the so-called “global village” requires acceptance of value judgments which exist literally in every process of intercultural business activity (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). Therefore, establishing neutral communication in the studied intercultural business environment is virtually impossible. Our counterpart in business communication will always react to our verbal and non-verbal expression so it is essential that both companies know each other's cultural values well. What is particularly problematic with the studied companies is that the employees still have the perception that the two cultures are very similar since they were once part of Yugoslavia. In reality they are very different. It is essential that, primarily through education and

consciousness-raising about cultural diversity, company employees accept the need to pay more attention to how, when and what to communicate. Only in such a way will the cross-cultural differences in communication be reduced to such an extent that they will no longer pose a significant barrier. In particular, Company Y has to build on this, because according to the results of our research, its staff was not aware that such communication barriers exist.

Ad (iv) The model suggests to “choose appropriate value judgments for a particular cultural circle, by which the message will be formulated” and to “prefer those which have actual, practical, and operational consequences that are conceivable and predictable for both transmitter and receiver” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). When companies communicate with each other, it is wise to use comments and assessments that both sides understand fairly well. It means that they rely on statements which take into account expertise, facts, numbers, statistics etc. rather than ideological value judgments or cultural stereotypes. Employees in Company X do have some basic knowledge of the Bosnian culture and language, while for the employees of Y Slovenian language and culture are completely foreign and they face difficulties in understanding it. Any business communication in the international language (i.e. English) which both parties understand could bring certain advantages, especially in terms of better understanding. But it would also mean that both sides deal with a language that is foreign to them and consequently the problem of “How do I express myself properly?” may arise. It is imperative that both companies invest in improving their language skills, intercultural competencies and understanding of each other because this is the only way to create conditions that are understandable and acceptable to both sides.

Ad (v) It is preferable that during the process of intercultural business communication “every single symbol should have only one meaning” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). We have already said that this is the fifth “golden rule” of the Jelovac model. As the project manager highlighted in the interview, it often happens that when a written communication is not included, the response of the receiver of communication is limited and/or problematic. It is essential to establish a Code of conduct in staff communication, not only for written but also oral communication. Such a Code could stabilise and crystallize the meaning of every important symbol which could cause difficulty in intercultural communication. Thus a situation cannot happen like in our case where a message that was sent with the intent to have a situation resolved, the receiver of the information only saw it as a notice and did not feel the need to reply. Employees at the highest levels in both companies should therefore

establish formal rules about what is expected from employees upon receiving certain information.

Ad (vi) Efficient business in intercultural and/or multicultural environment is primarily dependent, according to the model, on “explicit and optimal definition of the meaning of the greatest number of the key symbols” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). At this point we want to build on the establishment of rules / norms of communication that the employees have to follow and adjust to. We have to define the meaning of all important symbols. This is the only way to avoid misunderstandings, value disputes and conflicts. In addition to establishing a communication code, as mentioned in one of the previous paragraphs, it is essential that the tasks and expectations of employees from the management are clearly defined in the description of their duties. This way the employees know exactly when to communicate with whom, how, what is expected of them and what they can expect from the receiver. Such definitions give employees control over their tasks and allow the management to have traceability, visibility and control over the full process.

Ad (vii) The best way to define important key symbols for mutual understanding in international business is to define those using analytical and operational definitions. According to the seventh principle of the model they “have the highest informative value in intercultural communication” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). It is essential to establish the rules of the company, which are simple, broken down from the general to the individual. It is necessary to make these rules useful and effective, especially in terms of raising understanding, so the employees recognise and accept the differences between cultures.

Ad (viii) As we see above, the eighth rule of the model states that “the effectiveness of interpretation of a value judgment in intercultural communication is dependent on the capability of the transmitter and the receiver to take into account the horizon of its context / discourse as broadly as possible” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). In addition to formal education on mutual cultural similarities and differences, it is also essential that the employees learn from experience and use the lessons learned in the past to make the communication more effective in the future. Such learning-by-doing is important to avoid inconvenience due to cultural errors in communication. For example, it is wrong for Company X to take as granted that Company Y understands and accepts the values they communicate. It should not be expected from Y to actually be communicating the same values to their business environment as X. There is a particular need for diversity in advertising services that the companies offer. While in Slovenia, some degree of

nudity in advertising is acceptable, such advertisements need further consideration and re-design in Bosnia. Likewise, internal communications, especially in terms of joint meetings, need to be tailored to standards of both cultures, so there are no shocks and inconvenience at the event itself.

Ad (ix) One of the important principles of the Jelovac model is that “every change or innovation of the meaning of the symbols used in the value judgments should be explicitly announced” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). In business and everyday life people undergo evolutions or even conversion in their values, norms and beliefs. That is quite a normal part of business life. But if business people do not want to cause misunderstandings, conflicts and chaos in communication, they have to announce in advance to the others the changes in their judgments before they become “noise” in the communication process. In our case, employees and managers of both companies have to take the time to explicitly explain in writing (i.e. e-mail, etc.) every novelty in existing rules or standard of conduct. It will take time, but in the long-term it would prevent troubles.

Ad (x) “To ensure the necessary invariant meaning of the value judgments used in intercultural communication, we should design the mechanisms for stabilisation of those value systems coming from different cultural circles (especially in the process of transition) which are changing, developing and improving” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). The two studied cultures are quite different and it is therefore wrong to presume that the employees coming from a predominantly Muslim background will act and communicate in the same manner as the employees coming from a religiously neutral and non-Muslim environment. The values of the two different cultures are quite different, so it is essential that the communication is patient and careful and based on the common denominator of mutual interests in making profit as the best mechanisms for stabilisation of such different value systems.

Ad (xi) The eleventh rule of Jelovac model asserted that “there are no right meanings, official patterns, authentic norms or standards etc. in any intercultural communication process; therefore, the horizon/discourse of pluralism is open for imagination, infinite set of interpretations, and variety of value systems” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). It is important to note, that we are not always right. It is necessary for the two companies to build on positive relationships. It is essential that they are keen on gaining a full understanding of each other. The two companies must realise that neither of them is self-sufficient and that they are actually co-creating each other’s future success. The most positive finding in the

case study is that all of the people involved in the multicultural communications perceive their counterpart as an individual, thus giving the right note to relationship-building. Incorporating joint cultural values in this communication should enable both parties to reach a common level of understanding and cooperation.

Ad (xii) “High probability of consensus and low probability of dissent in intercultural business communication is reachable by widening the scope of interaction between different cultural circles and making it more intensive” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). The essence of intercultural communication in this case is doing business and collaborating to build profit for the entire group. It is essential that employees feel good in their roles and have no problems communicating with others in the company. The cultural background of Company Y dictates openness, sensitivity and cooperation, while in Company X informal and open communication does not come naturally when doing business. It is important, therefore, that the employees of the two companies stay in constant interaction and respect one another in order to get an understanding of what is acceptable to the other culture. This will enable the employees of both companies to operate on the same page and with the same common goals.

Ad (xiii) “A higher probability of consensus and lower probability of dissent in intercultural business communication is attainable by including intellectual honesty and/or cognitive morality into the context/discourse and avoiding irony, cynicism, grotesqueness, contempt, mockery” (Jelovac, 2008: 138-139). One of the greatest values that many cultures have in common is honesty. Companies X and Y work their best and are both aware that they need to offer a service that will satisfy even the most demanding client in order to survive. Therefore, business ethics is the key. Moral values must be an essential part of business communication. Employees in both companies know that any dispute can be resolved with the proper approach, professionalism and honesty. It is, however, crucial that they learn for the future and focus on avoiding the same communication barriers again.

We can conclude that for the companies studied in this case, it is of great importance that the employees learn to communicate in line with cultural differences. In addition to the differences brought on by culture, the two companies also differ in the level of education of their employees. It is vital that the companies work on upgrading the skills of their employees to be able to communicate effectively beyond their own cultural environment.

Discussion and conclusions

Advances in technology, globalisation and expansion of businesses across state borders bring new challenges to the employees of companies that decide to work in such environments. One of these challenges is certainly brought about by communication in multicultural environments. People are hugely defined by the environment they live and work in, where their cultural background plays an extensive role as well. People take the norms and values that their culture transmits as their own and often take them for granted. They are not aware that they hold these norms and values until they come into contact with people that do not share the same values and have a different view of certain ways of conduct. In such circumstances they might become aware that their culture is possibly not the best and most suitable one, but also by no means the only culture there is.

With ever-expanding international business environments, more and more companies are facing these cultural differences in their everyday business communication. These differences were the topic of this article and were studied and analysed through a case study of two businesses working in geographically proximate but culturally very distinct environments. The barriers in communication that were defined by the employees of these two businesses were studied and resolved through the application of a model for fruitful business communication presented by Jelovac (2008) and Jelovac and Rek (2010). Although the study was quite limited in size and scope, certain conclusions can be drawn from it:

Companies that operate in a multicultural environment should focus on educating their employees, not only in terms of upgrading their business skills, but also in terms of building their awareness and sensitiveness of cultural differences that arise when doing business in a multicultural environment. The case study we present is based on cooperation of two different cultures that are geographically close, so employees can overcome the barriers that might arise due to cultural differences by direct personal (face-to-face) contact. In business environments where businesses are involved with more than one different culture and these cultures can also be geographically far apart, the cultural awareness is even more crucial. Establishing an educational system about the multicultural environment the business operates in should in such cases be a must, so employees can do their business properly, successfully and in line with all cultural backgrounds involved.

Cultural differences and related barriers in business communication can be overcome with a systematic approach by implementing a structured and clearly defined process that is common to the employees in all

participating companies. The example presented in this article shows that the processes in Company X are formal and structured, whereas in Company Y these are more loose and informal. The top management must establish processes and formal procedures that will be common to employees within all the business units globally. The employees should be made aware of these processes, taught how to use them in their everyday operations and explained why their use can bring greater benefits to the business on a global level.

Fruitful intercultural communication is the result of managerial efforts to ensure that company values are in line and connected to all the major values of the cultures that operate within the business environment. Only in such a manner can the top management ensure a common vision for all employees, regardless of the cultural background they come from. If employees work towards a common goal and are also well aware of differences that exist between cultures in the business environment, they will work towards a common key objective - global success of the company.

This empirical study contributes to the field of multicultural communication by demonstrating direct applicability of the Jelovac model of fruitful communication to a real-world case. At the same time it shows that geographic proximity is not necessarily the demonstrator of cultural similarities. It is therefore essential to take cultural differences into account when engaging into international business, otherwise barriers might arise that could limit effective and quick business operations.

6. References

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