

German-Albanian Intercultural communication and interaction in the workplace

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Abstract. Remote work has brought societies and cultures more together than ever. The workplace has been taken to another level and understanding the cultures and behaviours of different countries has become essential, so that there can be a harmonious working environment. Different ways of conveying the information in the same situation and context but at the same time in two different cultural environments, often lead to inconsistencies or problems in different situations in everyday life. In this thesis, German-Albanian communication and interaction in the workplace is observed from a cultural point of view. Communication in the workspace environment has quite a high influence on the working atmosphere, satisfaction, productivity of the employees or companies worldwide management success. The field of study focuses on the workspace since the reason why many Albanian citizens stay in Germany or have work relations with German companies is the offer of a working contract with higher income possibilities. The purpose of this study is to achieve understanding from both sides of the cultures or even let other cultures understand them both at the same time. Beside the theoretical solution of this problem, an illustrated book with funny and simple illustration has been designed to bring better understanding for the cultural differences independent from their age, gender or intellectual level.

1. Introduction

1.1. Subject and purpose of the study

Communication problems of foreign employees in Germany as well as intercultural communication has been an interesting field of study for many researchers. The following observation is going to highlight both topics from a point of view which has been considered as little observed. In the past few years, Germany has become a country, in which many immigrants from different countries seek for a better life with higher incomes and standards in the fields of economy, education, and health. One of them are also Albanian citizen. They are a part of almost every area of everyday life and in constant contact and interaction with German citizens. They are present for instance in the workplaces, schools, recreational spaces. Finding themselves in encounter with each other, both these cultures make an exchange of information with or without them being aware of their doing. Different ways of conveying the information in the same situation and context but at the same time in two different cultural environments, often lead to inconsistencies or problems in different situations in everyday life.

In this thesis, German-Albanian communication and interaction in the workplace is observed from a cultural point of view. The field of study focuses on the workspace since the reason why many Albanian citizens stay in

Germany is the offer of a working contract. Through practical examples, intercultural communication problems are easier to study. The other reason is that through this study an understanding can be developed from both sides of the cultures, since the communication in the workspace environment has quite a high influence on the working atmosphere, satisfaction, and productivity of the employees, which, in a business, is relevant to the company's management.

This study is pilot research, meaning that „...first limited attempt to address a relatively under-researched subject area “[1] (Jin 1994, pg. 1; Keinem u.a. 1982:12). It is based on 13 individual interviews on a range of jobs: construction area, medical area, development and software engineering, educator, truck driver, executive employees, project manager.

The purpose of the study is to find verbal and nonverbal communication styles from both cultural groups, similarities and differences as well as determine communication difficulties and misunderstanding. At the same time, to support the employees and employers of both cultures in the intercultural communication processes so that the working space atmosphere and productivity can be improved.

1.2. Questions

“Communication between members of different ethnic in Alaska and northern Canada, as elsewhere, frequently

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results in confusion, misunderstanding and conflict.” [1] (Jin, 1994, pg. 7) Can this saying be said for the everyday interaction between Germans and Albanians as well? Can this prevent a successful cohabitation in the working environment now or in the future?

Returning to everyday life, Albanians themselves notice some incompatibilities on the behaviour with German citizens, without taking in consideration the different point of view of the cultures. Therefore, they raise the questions: “Why are Germans so cold? Why do they not want to hug or show affection to us when we meet? Why do they interpret or see the world so differently from us? Why do they react differently in these occurrences from us?”

These questions and other ones similar to these seem to be raised without having the understanding that each group of culture reacts and acts with each other based on their cultural patterns. The same questions or situations that are found in everyday life are repeated quite often in the workplace of the individuals. Most Albanians living in Germany find their job a very important part of their life, because their wage labour is a way they are allowed to continue to stay in Germany. Since they spent more than half of the day at their job and value it as a main motive of holding on to the opportunity to maintain the possibility of a residence in Germany, their relationship to their colleagues and supervisors does not only affect their work satisfaction, but also their psychological behaviour. This influences them in the quality of the productivity as well as the atmosphere it is created from both parties automatically indicating on the results and economy of the company.

Mutual behaviour of employees and their superiors influence - positively or negatively - the work atmosphere, which is felt during everyday communication, in that the manner or intensity and effectiveness of communication reflects the work situation there. Communication in the workplace must therefore focus on both groups of stakeholders: [2] (Kartai, 1997, 9 / vgl. Müller 1993: 27-52)

Based on the aspects mentioned above the following questions are raised:

- What communication styles are used by the Germans and Albanians at the workplace?
- In which communication situations do the contacts between Germans and Albanians happen?
- How do Albanians work and live in this host country? How do Germans think and react to Albanians in the workplace?
- Which factors affect the cultural integration of the individual into a foreign environment?
- Can better language knowledge (German and Albania) ensure better intercultural communication? If not, what are the difficulties in the German-Albanian communication?
- What can visual communication contribute to solving communication problems?

2 Theory: The cultural differences between both countries

2.1 Intercultural communication

Going back in history, the way we dealt with cultural differences sides more with a response of an avoidance. If an avoidance of this confrontation was not possible or unsuccessful, then a conversion of beliefs, values and the way of thinking was implied. Politics, economics and religion were used as “tools” to impose on others the beliefs of a culture. A more extreme reaction to the other cultures was to “kill” them by having in mind that if people had a more similar way of thinking between each other, it would be easier to be around. On one hand, the monocultural way of thinking says that “... similarities generally allow people to predict the responses of others to certain kinds of messages and to take for granted some basic shared assumptions about the nature of reality.” [5] (ff. Bennett, 1998, pg.1).

Augmenting that differences might represent the conflicts and misunderstandings in a society. On the other hand, intercultural communication cannot accept that and encourages understanding, appreciation, and respect of each culture’s differences, as important values to create harmony and open-minded societies.

Whenever the theme of cultural difference comes up in the society, not rarely is a culture associated with a stereotype. (...) To avoid these stereotypes and anticipate the culture of another country or group, people often turn to history, art, literature, movies, music and dance. By this action they are participating in gaining knowledge about that culture, which is referred to as the objective culture. Part of the objective culture are also the systems of politics, economics, society and linguistics. (...) Understanding objective culture may create knowledge, but it doesn’t necessarily generate competence. [5] (vgl. Bennett, 1998, pg.1-4)

2.2 The cultural differences

Many scholars have developed arguments based on the idea that in the future the decisive consequence in many aspects of global developments will no longer be conflicts between states, between peoples or ideologies, but between cultures, confrontations between civilizations [3] (Zydi Dervishi, Veshtrime te kryqezuara ne det, 2021, S.101). According to social scientist Dervish, it is argued that such predictions are based primarily on several factors that lead to disagreements and conflicts between people of different cultures.

Conflicting attitudes and perceptions of people about the relationships between individuals, man and God, social groups and state structures, etc. These differences in the mentality of cultures have crystallized over the centuries and have been imposed on the characteristics of cultures, languages and religious beliefs of civilizations, leading to conflicts when two or more cultures with their different views meet.

The intensification of multiple interactions of peoples of different civilizations increases the possibility of mutual interactions of their cultures by increasing the transition of cultural elements from one culture to another. These elements do not obscure the distinctive features

between cultural systems, but provoke opposing attitudes and reactions. „Experience shows that differences between cultures of the same civilization are generally more tolerable than differences between cultures of different civilizations.“

The two opposing tendencies of cultures, such as the Western culture compared to the culture of the Balkan regions, is one of the factors that influence the conflicts of civilizations, because they attempt to influence each other. On the one hand, there is the desire to increase the influence of Western countries on other civilizations and cultures, especially in the fields of science, politics, and technology. On the other hand, non-Western civilizations seek to preserve and develop their original cultural characteristics, as well as to Westernize themselves by increasing their influence on a global scale. [3] (cf. Zydi Dervishi 2012, 103-104)

3. Formal communication

During the interviews the answer of the Albanian employees when asked for their relationship with their German colleagues, most of them answered as having mainly a good correlation, despite some differences. The same answer came from the German employees. (...)

An issue that was mentioned quite often from the interviewees, was the tidiness in the working place. Some of the interviewees complained about the behaviour of the Albanian employees related to the motivation of them to constantly keep their working area clean. They took it as a lack of interest. Germans were referred to maintain their working area as quite dissent. They see the maintenance of their office or their workspace as their responsibility. Observations show that Germans, before they leave their workplace, they start to put their things in order and make sure that everything is put in its place. This routine they do voluntarily. Albanians, during the interviews were characterized as not willingly taking the responsibility of cleaning their place by the end of a working day. They do not see “the cleaning of their working area” as part of their profession. It was explained as not being a necessity, since the companies do hire cleaning employees that are expected to maintain the areas at the company clean. (...) ... this way of mindset doesn't necessarily create conflicts, but creates confusion of the employer toward this kind of behaviour. Based on observations, Albanians perceive the idea of cleaning, which they were not hired for, as a substandard work for which they are being pushed to do without their will. (...)

In Germany rules and regulations are strictly followed, preventing the people from being able to have spontaneous solutions for the problems that occur at the workplace. An example is the construction branch, which sometimes requires a spontaneous understanding and response toward the problem. Albanians, being raised in a country, where the facilities are not invested as much as in Germany, tend to be more practical and find quicker solutions within a shorter time. (...)

Just as much as an advantage, it can also lead to the disadvantage of not having the patience to deal with the details of a job that has to be done in the same amount of

time. The lack of patience with the details and requirements that a work in the German standards might require, has put Albanians into a difficult position, where sometimes Germans stay unsatisfied with the job.

Germans are mostly very time oriented when it comes to their working hours. They expect to have the ability to leave at the actual time the working hours have been done for the day. Compared to the German employees, Albanians were specified as being more willing to do after office hours if the work had to be done at a shorter period of time or even to not have a problem getting a call after the working hours were over. It was claimed that if the chef would ask them to stay for a longer period at work, they would not oppose him.

In the German mentality, the individual's health care is more important than finishing a project or work in a shorter period. A work, which couldn't be done by the end of the day, can be continued on the following day, which means that Germans no longer wish to talk after the working hours about work issues. This behaviour of Germans is not always received in the best way from Albanians point of view.

An Albanian working as a group leader at a company was found in a situation where while working with a German coworker, this theme was turned to a conflict. As the leader of the group, he was responsible for the project that was being undertaken. While talking to his coworkers about the situation they were in, he had tried to explain the necessity of them to be working longer on that day, since a deadline set by the end of the day had to be met. (...) The German employer, even though was aware of the hard situation, where the work had to be done by the time it had been set, did withstand his group leader's wish (...). This conflict made the supervisor go to further conclusions, where he thought that the German employee was assaulting him, because of him being a foreigner and having a higher position than the German employee. (...) (Based on the Interview, Person M) In another situation, where Albanians are in the position of the employee, they seem to have very pleased superiors with the work and amount of time they put into it. However, Albanians seem to have a different opinion on this matter, where their thought about it is that “the readiness that we provide, the Germans use very well” (Based on the Interview, Person F).

The example presented above proclaims also that Germans often separate work from their free time. Many declared that it is hard to create friendships with their German coworkers outside of the workplace, since they define very clearly the line between a coworker relationship and that of a friendship. (...) Albanians define friendship as a state of respect which follows with the terms of trust and support between two or more individuals and is presented as a high value in the society. Among Albanians, friendship at the workplace, presents a better understanding and easier cooperation between people, because being trustworthy and supportive are high principles that are followed at the workplace too. As a matter of fact, they find it important to create friendships at the workplace (...).

4. Conclusion and First Conceptual Thoughts for Praxis

In this paper it has been studied the communication problems at the workplace between Albanian and German employees and their supervisor.

It has been based on empiricism and literature research methods. Since the first phase of the research, it has been defined that the interviews will be undertaken with employees of different fields of the economy, with the purpose to have a more inclusive point of view of the Albanian culture and difficulties that Albanian foreigners encounter every day at the workplace.

Both cultural groups are quite satisfied with the intercultural relationship they have, but during the interviews it has been augmented, that they have cultural as well as communication differences, which might interfere with the working atmosphere. Through this comparative analysis has been noticed, that both cultural groups have shown interest into having a better understanding of each other's culture and increase the chances of stronger cooperation in the working place.

The formal communication during the working hours is rather more dominant than the informal one. The perspective of the way Albanian see the relationship with their coworkers has an indication in the other cultural group, who also is sometimes unclear about the behaviour Albanians show with each-other or even with their German colleagues.

It turns out that Albanian are a very collectivistic society, that put a lot of value into friendships and relationships they built at the workplace. Their relationship indicates the successful process of cooperation and atmosphere created between employees, which is followed from further accomplishments of an operation. In the research it has also been noticed the role that informal communication plays in the progress inside a business. In the Albanian mentality, closeness between employees can be developed through spending more time to get to know the individuals at the workplace. Germans underestimate the impact informal communication has in building group harmony and readiness to work together. They pay more attention to their qualifications and not to their socio-cultural roles.

After the important cultural and communicative differences have been pointed out, from this research have been given the following solutions: To increase the chances of better communication and understanding, it is required for both cultural groups to invest into this issue. On one side is the influence and offerings of the government and social investments in the education possibilities for the foreigners, who are trying to adjust in the German culture. (...) On the other hand, they should accept each other's cultural standards and not exclude or refuse them. There should exist the interest of both cultures in understanding and adjusting their behaviour toward each other.

Based on the last point, a compendium will be developed in the format of a small book to orientate both cultures on the differences that they have. It will have explanations in the simplest forms of design, by using

simple and funny pictogram illustrations – A pictogram needs to capture user's attention (users need to see the pictogram), to improve user's comprehension of warnings (users need to attend to it), and it also needs to increase their awareness of risk, generally by serving as an „instantaneous memorandum “of a risk [4] (Tijus, Barcenilla, Cambon de Lavalette, Meunier, 2007: Otsubo, 1988). – to allow all people, independent from their knowledge of language, to understand the main concept of this handbook. (...)

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