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# Social Competences and Their Development in Culturally Diverse Teams – the Results of In-depth Group Interviews

ABSTRACT

Social competences in the workplace have been of interest to researchers for years. They are among the key competences for lifelong learning and relate to all types of behaviour that enable individuals to participate and cooperate effectively – both socially and professionally – in various environments (European Parliament, 2006).

Employees' social competences play a vital role in the workplace as they influence relationships within teams. These relationships affect team effectiveness, thus are particularly significant in culturally diverse work environments.

In the theoretical part of the article, the author explains the term "social competences," describes their elements, and discusses their role in the effective functioning of multicultural teams. In the empirical part, she presents the methodology of her study, the results obtained, and the conclusions derived from them.

The study described in the article (two in-depth group interviews) was conducted in 2022, and its participants were managers of different nationalities who work in multinational companies and have been managing culturally diverse teams for a minimum of three years. The Author assumed the preliminary nature of the study and intends to continue it in the future within the area analysed in the article. Based on the review of the literature and the results of her study, the author has demonstrated a vital role played by employees' social competences in culturally diverse workplaces. In the opinion of the managers who participated in the study, the most important social competences include verbal and non-verbal communication, social intelligence, and building positive interpersonal relations. As far as the most effective ways of developing these competences in members of multicultural teams are concerned, they listed individual trainings, workshops, and coaching.

KEYWORDS:   competences, social competences, multicultural teams,
managers, employees, cultural differences

STRESZCZENIE

Kompetencje społeczne i ich rozwój w zespołach zróżnicowanych kulturowo – wyniki pogłębionych wywiadów grupowych

Problematyka kompetencji społecznych pracowników jest analizowana przez badaczy od lat. Kompetencje społeczne to jedne z kluczowych kompetencji, które odrywają ważną rolę w uczeniu się przez całe życie i odnoszą się do wszystkich zachowań pozwalających jednostkom na efektywny udział i współpracę w różnych środowiskach, w obszarze życia zarówno społecznego, jak i zawodowego (European Parliament, 2006). Kompetencje społeczne pracowników mają bardzo istotne znaczenie, bowiem wpływają na relacje w zespołach. Od tych relacji zależy sprawność i skuteczność funkcjonowania zespołów, co jest bardzo istotne w warunkach zróżnicowania kulturowego środowiska pracy.

W części teoretycznej artykułu wyjaśniono pojęcie „kompetencje społeczne", opisano elementy tych kompetencji. Omówiono również rolę kompetencji społecznych w skutecznym funkcjonowaniu wielokulturowych zespołów. W dalszej kolejności przedstawiono w artykule metodologię i wyniki przeprowadzonych badań oraz wynikające z nich wnioski.

Badania opisywane w artykule (dwa wywiady grupowe pogłębione) przeprowadzono w 2022 r. z menedżerami różnych narodowości, którzy pracują w międzynarodowych przedsiębiorstwach i minimum od trzech lat zarządzają zróżnicowanymi kulturowo zespołami. Autorka przyjęła, że badania mają charakter wstępny i w przyszłości mogą być kontynuowane w zakresie analizowanej w artykule problematyki. Na podstawie literatury przedmiotu i w nawiązaniu do wyników badań wykazano istotną rolę kompetencji społecznych pracowników w środowisku różnic kulturowych. Menedżerowie zarządzający wielokulturowymi zespołami jako najbardziej istotne kompetencje wymienili: komunikację werbalną i niewerbalną, inteligencję społeczną i budowanie pozytywnych relacji interpersonalnych. Natomiast w zakresie rozwiązań związanych z rozwojem kompetencji społecznych pracowników zespołów wielokulturowych zwrócili uwagę szczególnie na indywidualne treningi, szkolenia i coaching indywidualny.

SŁOWA KLUCZE:  kompetencje, kompetencje społeczne, zespoły wielokulturowe, menedżerowie, pracownicy, różnice kulturowe

## Introduction

There is no denying that progressing globalization affects all aspects of organizations' functioning, including an increasingly growing role of human resources. As nowadays employees are among the most valuable

assets for organizations, understandably, the demand for their high social competences rises. In the 21$^{st}$ century, employees need these competences not only to achieve goals of their teams and companies but also to be able to function efficiently and to adapt flexibly to changing international and intercultural work environments.

Variants of social interactions are innumerable, thus every person needs a set of adequate social skills and abilities. Their role has been analysed in the subject literature for years, and their growing significance in both personal and professional life is emphasised in them all (Reitz, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Social skills and abilities are usually termed social competences, and this concept is gaining researchers' increasing attention.

Social competences are defined as the ability to interact socially in an adept way, that is, to get along with other people, to initiate, develop, and maintain close and healthy relationships, and to react to social situations in an adequate and flexible manner.

A person's social competences stem from a wide range of his cognitive abilities, emotional processes, behavioural skills, social awareness, as well as personal and cultural values that are pertinent to interpersonal relationships. No wonder they are so important in culturally diverse environments, in which the complexity of social interactions is much higher than culturally homogeneous ones.

Good relations with co-workers, team members, and other employees of a company are conductive to achieving organizational success. If managers possess relevant knowledge and understanding of the diversity of their employees' social competences – particularly those from multicultural teams – they can easily discover regularities and patterns of their social behaviours, which will facilitate the management.

The aim of the article is to demonstrate the significance of social competences of those employees who are members of multicultural teams and to list the activities that can be used to develop these competences. The author formulated the following research questions: what social competences are particularly important in the opinion of the managers of multicultural teams? What solutions for the development of multicultural team members social competences do the managers suggest?

The author used the results of the interviews she conducted with the managers to analyse selected social skills based on the model of social competences described by Agryle (Agryle, 2002). The author referred to this model in her previous studies and publications devoted to social competencies (e.g. Knap-Stefaniuk & Sowa-Behtane, 2020).

## Social competencies – definition of the term

The view that employees are an organization's most valuable asset is now-adays widespread both in the literature and management practices. It was formulated based on the development of management sciences and the new perception of human resources'role stemming from the shift towards the knowledge economy. In this new economy, knowledge and its applica-tion are the key sources of an organization's economic development and value in the market. Employees' competences treated as a source of this value are of particular significance, because the long-term value growth depends on a high level of an organization's employees' various compe-tencies, social competences being not the least important among them.

Competencies can be divided into two broad categories: personal competences and task or job-based competences. They can be treated as observable performance, standards or quality of the employee perfor-mance outcome, or a person's attributes (Hoffman, 1999; Lee & Salleh, 2009; Levenson, 2005; Palan, 2005; Woodruffe, 1992).

According to Parry (1998), competences are a cluster of related knowl-edge, attitudes, and skills which have an impact on a person's job, corre-late with his or her performance in the workplace, can be measured against accepted standards, and can be improved through training. Lonnblad and Vartiainen (2012) treat competences as a set of observable dimensions of a person's performance, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behav-iours, as well as collective team, process, and organizational capabilities, all of which are closely related to high performance and allow an organiza-tion to develop a sustainable competitive advantage. Generally speaking, competences can be viewed as either competent behaviour or as a person's trait (Jurek, 2012). Within the behavioural approach, competences are defined as proper, effective, and economically efficient behaviours, which is particularly relevant in professional contexts.

Researchers from various fields of science (including psychology, man-agement, and broadly understood education), have been analysing social competences for years. Many argue that there is no one-size-fits-all defini-tion of social competences (Arghode, 2013; Buchs & Butera, 2015; Dirks. Treat and Weersing, 2007; Lang, 2010; Mazurek-Kucharska, 2008; Stump, Ratliff, Wu, & Hawley, 2009; Witt & Ferris, 2003). Moreover, this term is used interchangeably with social skills, relational skills, interactional skills, or communicative skills (Jakubowska, 1996). However, all authors admit that social competences are soft competences.

The term "social competences" can be analysed in a number of ways. For example, they can be understood as relational skills, which enable a person to initiate and manage various interpersonal relationships. R. White defines

social competences as skills that lead to effective interactions with the out-side world and equates social competences with social skills (Sęk, 2004, pp. 74–75). Social competences are also defined as a set of basic social skills which affect effective functioning in situations when entering into relation-ships with other people is required (Tomorowicz, 2011). Another definition of these competences sees them as complex skills which condition successful coping in social situations and which are acquired by an individual through social training (Matczak, 2001; Matczak & Martowska, 2013).

Social competences are also defined as an ability to behave in socially appropriate manners following social expectations (Gresham, 1995). A socially competent person can flexibly adapt their social behaviours rely-ing on social information they have at their disposal (Taborsky & Oliveira, 2012). This ability, based on behavioural flexibility, enhances a person's social interactions and relationships (Savickas, 2005).

It is worth emphasising here that social competences linked with behavioural attributes affect the performance of both individuals and organisations (Lee & Salleh, 2009; Mazurek-Kucharska, 2011), which is why employees' social competencies are so important in building positive team relationships, task completion, goal achievement, problem solving, finding new solutions, and taking on challenges.

While investigating social competences, researchers have also paid attention to their components. For example, J. Borkowski lists the follow-ing components of social competences (Borkowski, 2003, p. 117): social knowledge (systematic learning and broadening one's knowledge), self-knowledge, social experience understood as the sum of life experiences, knowledge of the principles of small social group and large community functioning, social personality, i.e. the ability to understand one's own emotional states and the emotional states of other people, social intelli-gence, i.e. the ability to resolve conflict, moral maturity, social authority, in addition to other abilities and skills.

For Kostelnik (Kostelnik et al., 2002), the components of social compe-tences are: adopting social values, developing a sense of personal identity, acquiring relevant interpersonal skills, learning how to optimize personal behaviours to comply with societal expectations, efficient planning and decision-making, and developing cultural competence.

However, the best-known model describing the structure-elements of social competences is M. Argyle's concept (Argyle, 1999, pp. 133–141, 247). Agryle describes social competences as the ability to possess and mas-ter skills that are used in social and antisocial situations in order to achieve desired outcomes in interpersonal relations (Agryle, 2002).

According to Agryle, social competences form a set of various skills which enhance social interactions and include: rewarding (e.g. positive

reinforcement of a relationship through verbal and non-verbal communication), assertiveness (exerting desired impact without harming a given social interaction), self-presentation (impression-oriented behaviour), verbal and non-verbal communication, empathy (the ability to notice and take into account other people's views and feelings), and knowledge of social life rules, i.e. social intelligence (Agryle, 2002).

Summing up, employees' social competences and the development of these competences are crucial for successful team management. Socially incompetent employees have little or no social knowledge, are afraid of entering into close social relationships with others, of being the focus of attention and of being evaluated by other employees and the team, are unable to cope successfully with unforeseen or complex social situations, and have low motivation to work in a team. Undoubtedly, all these features negatively affect team performance and the entire organization, thus developing social competences should be among the main objectives of contemporary education systems and institutional instruction (Gedviliene, 2012).

## The role of social competences in the efficient functioning of multicultural teams

Progressing globalization has led to an increase in diversity within societies and organisations, and organisations worldwide are facing the challenge of developing new effective solutions to deal with omnipresent rapid change (Mockaitis, Zander, & De Cieri, 2018). These challenges include finding new ways of organizing work in multicultural teams and developing employees' social competences, as these exert a great impact on interactions and teamwork.

Cultural diversity in the workplace is constantly on the increase, and culturally diverse workforce means that employees from different cultures have different knowledge, different experiences, different thinking patterns, and different ways of analysing and solving problems (Martin, 2014). This diversity is particularly valuable in companies which operate on a global scale.

Furthermore, the strengths of multicultural teams include their ability to integrate specialised and dispersed capabilities, understand local needs, share knowledge and ideas, generate new solutions and team knowledge (Maznevski & Distefano, 2000), as well as draw from cultural diversity to create new solutions while respecting values, beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and experiences in members of culturally diverse teams. However, in

order to meet the challenges of managing such teams and building positive interactions and cooperation in them in order to overcome cultural divides and barriers, it is essential to care for and develop high social competencies of team members.

On the other hand, the functioning of multicultural teams is not devoid of problems resulting from their inherent complexities, which include diversity, team leadership, processes, and outcomes (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016; Halverson & Tirmizi, 2008; Jonsen, Maznevski, & Davison, 2012; Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander, & Maznevski, 2010; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010).

Managers of efficient multicultural teams employ the following four strategies to successfully deal with problems (Brett, Behfar, & Kern, 2006): adaptation (openly admitting the existence of cultural gaps and working around them), structural intervention (changing the team structure), managerial intervention (setting norms at the very beginning or turning for help to a higher-level manager), and exit (removing a troublesome team member when nothing else has worked).

The challenges faced by managers working with multicultural teams are not only those related to cultural differences but also those related to team members' social competences. These competences are particularly important in the smooth functioning of multicultural teams, as they significantly influence the performance of teams in such areas as creativity, innovation, quick problem solving, and flexibility (Trefry, 2001).

Low levels of employee social competences have a negative impact on the functioning of teams, relationships between team members, their cooperation and achievements. They also negatively affect more complex team cooperation, as the flexibility of team members is limited, and the joint achievement of goals requires their greater commitment (Trefny, 2001). That is why managers who take action promptly – after analysing and assessing the level of social competences of their team members – can successfully implement appropriate measures to develop social competences of their subordinates. These competences, especially in culturally diverse teams and when supported by committed managers, increase the speed with which teams work, ensure effective knowledge and experience sharing, and facilitate creative problem-solving, flexibility, and openness to challenges.

The development of employees' social competences is conductive to creating a new quality of team management which is based on satisfying and, most importantly, strong social relationships. Employees' high social competences are crucial for their harmonious cooperation in teams, particularly multicultural ones, which can undoubtedly build a competitive advantage for the entire organization.

Summing up, social competences understood as a set of skills are essential in strengthening social ties (Agryle, 2002). In the author's opinion, this is particularly important in organizations which employ culturally diverse teams, whose managers are responsible for the joint performance of all team members. The relationships and interactions between the employees of such teams, which are strongly correlated with their level of social competences, are essential in achieving organizational goals and functioning successfully as a team.

## Methodology

The author conducted the study described in the article – two semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions – in September 2022. It was a qualitative study, its technique was an in-depth group interview, and the research tool was an in-depth group interview scenario developed specifically for the purpose of this study.

The author employed her social and professional networks (snowball sampling) for recruiting managers for the interviews. The criterion for the selection of the respondents was their work experience on a managerial position (minimum three years of managing a team with employees from at least three different cultures). Both surveys were conducted online, via the ZOOM application, and lasted 90 and 95 minutes, respectively.

Before each interview, managers were informed of the aim of the interview, the confidentiality of the study (anonymity), and the possibility of opting out of the interview at any moment. The first interview, with all the respondents' consent, was recorded, while the second one was not because two respondents did not agree to it. The information collected during both interviews was transcribed, coded, categorised, and, whenever possible, the author also prepared a quantitative analysis of the empirical material. Five managers took part in interview one and five in interview two, and they came from different countries: Poland, Spain, Italy, Czechia, and Portugal. The characteristics of these ten respondents who took part in the study are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents (in-depth group interview no. 1)

| Respondents (managers) | nationality | Age | gender | work experience on a managerial position | the number of employees' nationalities in the team led by the manager | industry in which the manager's company operates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manager 1 | Polish | 46 | Female | 11 | 4 | food industry |
| Manager 2 | Spanish | 44 | Male | 8 | 5 | hospitality industry |
| Manager 3 | Italian | 37 | Male | 4 | 4 | tourism industry |
| Manager 4 | Czech | 51 | Female | 13 | 4 | consulting industry |
| Manager 5 | Portuguese | 55 | Male | 15 | 5 | aviation industry |

Source: Author's own study based on the interviews with the managers (2022).

As can be seen from the table above (Table 1), the first in-depth group interview was conducted with three male and two female managers aged between 37 and 55, with managerial experience of 4–15 years, who manage culturally diverse teams with employees from four or five cultures in companies from five different industries: food, hospitality, tourism, consulting, and aviation.

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents (in-depth group interview no. 2)

| Respondents (managers) | nationality | Age | gender | work experience on a managerial position | the number of employees' nationalities in the team led by the manager | industry in which the manager's company operates |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manager 1 | Polish | 41 | Male | 6 | 3 | automotive industry |
| Manager 2 | Spanish | 45 | Male | 10 | 4 | tourism industry |
| Manager 3 | Italian | 49 | Female | 9 | 4 | food industry |
| Manager 4 | Czech | 50 | Female | 12 | 4 | financial industry |
| Manager 5 | Portuguese | 38 | Male | 4 | 5 | hospitality industry |

Source: Authors' own study based on the interviews with the managers (2022).

The respondents of the second in-depth group interview were three male and two female managers aged between 38 and 50, whose work experience as managers ranged between four and twelve years, and who worked on culturally diverse teams with employees from three to five different cultures. The participants of this interview also represented five different industries: automotive, tourism, food, finance and hospitality. Both interviews were conducted in English.

## The managers' opinion on employees' social competences and challenges linked to their development

At the beginning of each group interview, the author informed the managers about different ways of defining the term "social competences" (including those described in this article) and asked them to develop their own definition of this term that would be accepted by all the respondents. In the first interview, the managers defined social competences as relational skills on the basis of which a person can build interpersonal relationships and manage these relationships appropriately. In the second interview, the managers agreed on defining social competences as social skills which determine a person's ability to function effectively in relations with others in a variety of situations.

During both interviews, the managers were asked to give their opinions regarding the importance of employees social competences in their teams (which were all culturally diverse teams). It is worth emphasising that all the respondents who took part in both interviews unanimously confirmed a great role played by employees' social competences, especially in the case of multicultural teams. They observed that these competences affect the ways in which teams operate, their efficiency, speed, flexibility, decision-making, reactions to difficult situations, problem solving, as well as introducing and managing change. Moreover, according to the managers, employees' social competences affect their daily work in such areas as: communication within the team, relations between team members, motivation to act, support for others in project work, search for the most creative solutions, sharing knowledge and experiences, relations and cooperation with other teams, and the image of the team in the organisation.

During the interviews, the managers were also asked to choose five (or fewer) social competences they considered the most important from the perspective of their experience in managing culturally diverse teams. They were given a list of competences compiled by the author including Agryle's classification presented in the theoretical part herein. The responses of

managers from the first and second in-depth group interviews are pre-
sented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Employees' social competences in managers' opinion (in-depth group interview no. 1)

| Social competencies | Manager 1 (Poland) | Manager 2 (Spain) | Manager 3 (Italy) | Manager 4 (Czechia) | Manager 5 (Portugal) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| rewarding | | | | | |
| assertiveness | | | | x | |
| self-presentation | x | | | x | |
| verbal and non-verbal communication | x | x | x | x | x |
| Empathy | | x | x | | x |
| social intelligence | x | x | x | x | x |
| building positive inter-personal relations | x | x | x | | x |
| solving interpersonal conflicts | | | | x | |
| developing self-iden-tity and group identity | X | x | x | | x |

Source: Authors' own study based on the interviews with the managers (2022).

Table 4. Employees' social competences in managers' opinion (in-depth group interview no. 2)

| Social competencies | Manager 1 (Poland) | Manager 2 (Spain) | Manager 3 (Italy) | Manager 4 (Czechia) | Manager 5 (Portugal) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| rewarding | | | | | |
| assertiveness | | | | x | x |
| self-presentation | | | | | |
| verbal and non-verbal communication | x | x | x | x | x |
| Empathy | x | | | | |
| social intelligence | x | x | x | x | x |
| building positive inter-personal relations | x | x | x | x | x |
| solving interpersonal conflicts | | x | x | x | |
| developing self-iden-tity and group identity | x | x | x | | x |

Source: Author's' own study based on the interviews with the managers (2022).

In the first interview, the following social competences were chosen the
most often: verbal and non-verbal communication (five responses), social
intelligence (five responses), building positive interpersonal relations

(four responses), and developing self-identity and group identity (four responses). Assertiveness, self-presentation, and solving interpersonal conflicts were chosen only once each. None of the managers chose rewarding.

In the second interview, the managers' most frequent choices were as follows: verbal and non-verbal communication (five responses), social intelligence (five responses), building positive interpersonal relations (five responses), developing self-identity and group identity (four responses), and solving interpersonal conflicts (three responses). Assertiveness was chosen by two managers and empathy by one. Rewarding and self-presentation were not chosen at all.

The managers were also asked to list activities which, in their opinion, can be used in developing employee social competences. The responses from the first group included: dedicated trainings and various activities aimed at providing employees with necessary knowledge and shaping their desired attitudes (the Polish manager); improving social competences through participation in an interactive learning process, broadening knowledge and practicing the acquired knowledge in specific situations (the Spanish manager); interpersonal trainings aimed at modifying previous attitudes/behaviours and trainings in specific social competences (the Italian manager); workshops aimed at eliminating bad habits which might result in low social competences, and interpersonal trainings (the Czech manager); individual coaching sessions in the area of developing different social competences (the Portuguese manager).

During the second interview, the respondents listed the following activities: individual and group coaching sessions aimed at developing social competences (the Polish manager); workshops (providing knowledge of different competences) and individual coaching sessions (practicing these competences in different situations) (the Spanish manager); individual trainings and individual coaching sessions aimed at developing social competences (the Italian manager); analysing and assessing social competences (e.g. through tests) and then adjusting specific training activities to competence levels (the Czech manager); individual and group trainings which develop employees' social competences (the Portuguese manager).

## Discussion

Many authors argue that improving employee competencies is beneficial to organizations in the financial terms of profit or productivity (Asree, Zain, & Razalli, 2010; Brooks & Nafukho, 2006; Levenson, 2005; Rose, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2006). In the area of non-financial benefits, educating employees and developing their competencies increases their engagement and

career development (Adanu, 2007; Inkson, 2008; Junaidah, 2008; Levenson, 2005; Lockhart, 2013), while developing competences linked with behavioural attributes affects employees and thus organization performance (Lee & Salleh, 2009). That is why the role and relevance of employees' social competencies is increasingly recognized in contemporary management, especially in case of culturally diverse teams. When employees' social competences are skilfully drawn on and effectively developed, they contribute to building the company's competitive advantage through unique relationships inside and outside.

The interviews revealed that the respondents accurately define the term "social competences" and are able to describe the role and significance of these competences in the work of multicultural teams. In their opinion, the key social competences are verbal and non-verbal communication, social intelligence, and building positive interpersonal relations, while the development of employees' social competences should be achieved through various solutions such as individual trainings, workshops, and coaching sessions.

The development of employees' social competences is particularly significant in culturally diverse work environments. Managers who work in these environments should analyse the competences of their subordinates and ensure the development of their potential, as the efficiency and effectiveness of multicultural teams depend on these competences, both in terms of the relations within a team and with other teams.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study was conducted on a small research sample because, as was mentioned above, it was of a preliminary nature. A larger sample, also in qualitative terms, will provide an opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of the research problem (e.g., by investigating the knowledge and experiences of other nationality managers).

It is also worth considering conducting larger quantitative studies, both among managers and employees from different cultures, as comparing their opinions on their employees' social competences and their development may lead to interesting conclusions.

## Conclusion

The interviews conducted and the analysis of the literature allow drawing the following conclusions regarding the significance of employees social competences and their development.

- Employees' social competences have a huge impact on the functioning of individual employees and teams. In order to improve the functioning of teams (internal and external relations within them), especially those with culturally diverse members, it is necessary to improve employees' knowledge of their social competences and to develop these competences through a number of trainings, workshops, and coaching sessions.
- Employees' social competences affect individual and team performance. They influence productivity, performance, and goal achievement.
- Through their social competences, employees exert a significant impact on cooperation and interpersonal relations within teams and on their own and the team's image.

Summing up, the development of employees social competences, especially in multicultural work environments, is a must. The level of these competences affects the quality of interpersonal relations, openness to initiate and maintain contacts with representatives of other cultures, joint work on task performance and goal setting, effective communication, conflict resolution (including cultural conflicts), and identification with the team and the organisation. Managers and HR professionals should ensure the proper development of the employees' social competences, as the success of an organisation greatly depends on its –(especially socially) competent employees.

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