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Arlene M. Garrick  
*University of Waterloo*

Stephen L.J. Smith  
*University of Waterloo*

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# Mis-Steps in the Dance of Differences: Problems and Potentials in Cross-Cultural Job Interviews

Arlene M. Garrick  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, ON, Canada

and

Stephen L. J. Smith  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, ON Canada

## **ABSTRACT**

With the proportion of immigrants in Canadian society increasing, knowledge of cultural differences is ever more critical. For tourism, parks, and other leisure organizations, as in most service organizations, recruiting the right employee is essential. Selecting and hiring the right people, at the right time, in the right place is a complex, stressful and costly undertaking for both the organization and the candidate. However, making the wrong hiring decision can result in even more problems. Interviewing is a key task in the hiring process, but interviewing in a cross-cultural environment requires skills that many employers lack. The proposed research will use a combination of interviews and relevant documentation (e.g., organizational policies), informed by a conceptual framework related to cross-cultural communication. In particular, the paper will review current research on the problems and challenges related to the need for more sensitive cross-cultural communications by managers in tourism and leisure organizations. The paper concludes summarizing this research by offering some tentative strategies for avoiding misconceptions arising based on cultural unawareness.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural differences, immigrants, cross-cultural communication, recruitment

## **INTRODUCTION**

Selecting and hiring the right people, at the right time, in the right place with optimal talent is essential to any organisation's global capability, strategic planning and direct and indirect costs (Holloway, 2003; Segalla, Sauquet, & Turati, 2001; Smith, 2009). As employment continues to rise and the number of job applicants increase, employers are faced with an ever more culturally diverse pool of candidates from around the world. The importation of human resource has gained increased recognition particularly because there are two forces to be recognized: (1) the increasing need for employers to import workers because of labour supply shortages and (2) the rise in the immigrant population. Human resource departments face challenges in their recruitment processes from the cultural diversity of applicants. Culture is being more and more recognized as a potential impediment to organizations success. One area where cultural insensitivity occurs is the interview room. Cultural "assumptions" are leading to misunderstandings and the loss of potentially good employees (Payne, 2004; Lim, Winter & Chan 2006).

Despite these challenges, cultural diversity can influence the effectiveness of attracting desirable applicants in tourism and leisure organizations. While a number of studies exist about culture, and limited research documents the effectiveness of recruiting practices across borders, there is also a

paucity of research on cross-cultural challenges with regards to the interviewing aspect of the recruiting process. Such deficiency, given the increase in cross border human traffic, has prompted research to address this gap by identifying issues and or difficulties associated with cross-cultural interviews. In addition, there is also a need for minority individuals to understand and tolerate, if not respect, the culture of the adopted country or those embraced by their employers. The responsibility is reciprocal and not just a one-way street. Although cultural diversity includes a multitude of differences, the focus of this paper is on cross-cultural differences occurring during interviewing and how that may influence recruitment

### *Purpose*

This proposed research intends to highlight the challenges faced by Canadian tourism and leisure organizations, where the employee population comprise at least 50% new Canadians, and make recommendations for training and the development of a procedural interview guide. The research seeks to explore assumptions associated with cross-cultural interviews that arise as a result of a lack of or inadequate knowledge of cultural differences in job interviews and how those misconceptions can lead to interviewers making the wrong decision based on their culturally insensitive assumptions. In addition, this study will offer a framework for understanding how to avoid the pitfalls of misconception and poor judgment as well as successfully conduct cross-cultural interviews associated with the movement of human resource across global highways.

The study will start with the notion that cultural diversity challenges exist in every-day recruitment processes, but that there is also a paucity of research on the concept of cross-cultural challenges with regards to interviewing aspect of the recruiting process. Such deficiency, given the increase in cross border 'mobile workforce', has prompted this research to address this gap by identifying issues and or difficulties associated with cross cultural interviews and, as such, this suggests a need for conceptual examination and elaboration.

### *Significance*

Results from this study will be used to assist HR staff, management and interviewers in leisure and tourism organizations on how to go beyond cultural assumptions to ensure effective recruitment is taking place. It will also help readers understand the challenges faced in attracting desirable applicants, and how cultural differences influence the effectiveness of recruitment practices in tourism and leisure organizations in the area of interviewing. Another point worth noting is that HR management need the workplace to reflect the diversity of the organization's clientele. Without an understanding of cultural idiosyncrasies, managers are likely to experience difficulty in interviewing. As such, this study will contribute to new knowledge, adding to the existing managerial theory by helping organizations to address the dynamics of human interaction in the global marketplace, thereby effecting positive global change and innovation. Understanding cross-cultural variables and their impact on HR managers' evaluation of a candidate's skills, experience and personality is fundamental to successful recruitment.

### *Potential Practical Application*

Finally, to the extent empirical research supports the propositions, several recommendations for HR management can be derived from discussions of this paper. Understanding the dynamics and influence of cultural nuances on cross-cultural interviews in recruiting is critical to successfully garnering the best human resources globally. Although prior research has offered useful insights on how to recruit more effectively, this paper suggests that adapting cross-cultural interview practices to

the requirements of the specific cultural context may be a key to successful interviewing. Consequently, potential practical applications that might stem from the findings will aid recruiters in tourism and leisure organizations to capitalize on the opportunities available to them. It will also:

- (i) ensure that culturally diverse staff are not discriminated against as a result of cross cultural misconceptions and poor judgment;
- (ii) engender in managers a better understanding of cultural differences and behaviours;
- (iii) ensure that managers are better prepared for interviewing;
- (iv) aid managements' understanding of how relevant it is to ensure individuals are placed where they most benefit the company and themselves; and
- (v) help managers make informed hiring decisions.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The success of an organization depends to a great extent on its human capital. Therefore, recruiters need to be aware of the cultural forces at play during an interview. Poor interview practices resulting from interviewers' bias, halo effect, and excessive use of unstructured interviews undermine an organization's competitive advantage (Graves & Karren 1996; Spence & Petrick 2000). Cultural assumptions can sometimes make it very difficult to recognize potentially excellent employees and thus, numerous promising applicants have been rejected because interviewers ignored or underestimated the powerful differences in processes across cultures.

Culture defined by Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, (2001) includes but is not limited to, language, arts and sciences, thought, spirituality, social activity, and interaction. Culture is concerned with beliefs and values of people based on how they interpret experiences and behave individually and in groups. Studies focusing on cultural diversity, especially management, human resource and recruitment in a multicultural environment, have been an area receiving increasing attention in the world today.

The fields of cross-cultural management, recruitment and cultural analysis have recently become focused on practical concerns about when people from different cultures meet. The influence of cultural diversity on international business recruitment practices will continue to increase in importance as a result of the liberalization of human resource markets worldwide and cross-border mergers and acquisitions (Kristof-Brown, Barrick & Franke 2002; Ployhart 2006; Segrest Purkiss, Perrewé, Gillespie, Mayes & Ferris, 2006). Over the years, cross-cultural encounters have become ever more frequent in a world where trade, migration, the media, and travel are pushing people and governments to confront and accommodate cultural and ethnic diversity. Cultural diversity plays an integral role in developing vision and imagination for future opportunities in the global business environment. Organizations, therefore, are becoming more aware of competitive advantages to be derived from international workplace diversity (Richard 2000).

### *Attracting and retaining applicants*

Organizations, on a whole, are no longer recruiting staff from the existing pool of locals they are familiar with. As such, they are facing cross-cultural challenges in how they recruit, manage and develop multi-cultural staff. The problem of attracting and retaining qualified workers, once an isolated issue only in business oriented organizations, has increasingly become a global challenge. The talent pool is shrinking (Ployhart 2006; Tucker, Kao, & Verma, 2005). Thus, recruitment and retention of employees is becoming a challenge, as well as a concern. One particular area in which management is experiencing the most difficulty is in interviewing, because they are not equipped with

the necessary skills to be able to identify and manage cross-cultural differences during interviews (Allen & Ma, 2009, Clarke, 1998; Stiles, n.d.).

To understand the management process within a particular country, managers need to be both knowledgeable and empathetic to what happens in other cultures so that they can be more effective when interacting with people in other countries. Knowledge of the nuances of other cultures can help HR managers avoid the pitfalls of misconception and poor judgment and this translates to more successful results in recruiting.

### *Problems and Consequences of Misconceptions in Cross-Cultural Interviews*

Recruitment is a crucial area of any business' human resource management. However, ensuring that the best people are hired to help develop and grow a business is more complicated in today's internationalized and multicultural environment. Payne (2004) opined that stereotypes and an overall lack of cross-cultural competencies can mean that the right people may not always be given the opportunities they deserve.

In addition, working, meeting, dealing, entertaining, negotiating and corresponding with colleagues or individuals from different cultures can be a minefield. Therefore, understanding and appreciating intercultural differences ultimately promotes clearer communication, breaks down barriers, builds trust, strengthens relationships, opens sphere or creates new opportunities and yields tangible results in terms of business success (Segrest Purkiss *et.al.* 2006).

The key strategy for recruiting, interviewing and hiring individuals from across different cultures for work in culturally diverse organizations is to be aware that cultural differences exist. It is impossible to know cultural norms from every different culture that exist, but to be aware of the existence of those norms is essential (Huer & Saenz, 2003). Through greater awareness and understanding of cross-cultural differences and how these differences can affect recruitment practices in organizations, recruiting a diverse work force will be seen as important, particularly its influence on productivity and retention.

Organizations in general and tourism and leisure organizations in particular share a common goal of hiring the best. However, when cultural misunderstandings occur in interviews, this may impede the process through misconception and erroneous judgment of recruiting the best staff for the organization. When interviewing individuals from other cultures, it is important that HR personnel conducting the interviews remember that their own cultural values and expectations can affect how they interpret the interviewee's skills and experience. Learning to handle cultural differences in interviews enables organizations' human resource managers or executives to not only get the best out of a candidate but also not to miss the opportunity to hire an excellent candidate due to misinterpretation or misunderstanding of cultural differences. (Graves & Karren, 1996; Judge & Ferris, 1992; Kiminsky, 2002).

To avoid missing a potentially great employee, HR personnel must be aware of cultural nuances that exist and how verbal and non-verbal communication can vary dramatically from one culture to another. Cross-cultural variables can be broken down into two categories, namely: **Discrete:** Context; Hierarchy; Pauses and silence; gestures, greeting and stereotype; **Specific:** eye contact; tone of voice; facial expressions and language. For example, candidates from countries where respect for hierarchy is high such as China or Vietnam will avoid making direct eye contact with the interviewer particularly when extending a greeting. In addition, a light hand shake is

commonly used when greeting westerners. In a country like the UK or US, eye contact is really important and serves to not only build trust but imbue confidence in the candidate's abilities and skills. Candidates from China and Vietnam are therefore often considered shy and lacking self-assurance. Although not readily apparent to the casual observer, there are strict rules about appropriate behaviour and the manner in which these individuals must act in order to respect the hierarchy ([http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_china.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_china.shtml); Hofstede, 2003; Selmer, 1998).

Another example revolves around how individuals relate to context. An individual from a low context culture such as Germany, Scandinavia, Canada or the US will be explicit (provide a lot more detail) when asked a question than someone from a high context culture (China, Greece, Japan or Spain) who might give a more reserved and indirect response. This can often be interpreted as either being talkative or not having adequate experience when it is really more a question of communication style preference. In many Asian cultures, silence is a form of communication and, as such, in an interview, an Asian candidate will not likely elaborate beyond his/her response to a direct question ([http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_china.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_china.shtml); Hofstede, 2003; Selmer, 1998).

Wheeler (2008) cites the following vignette to illustrate issues that can arise when recruiting someone from another culture.

*Rapinee was sure she would be offered the position we had open because she had the highest GPA possible from her home university, which was rated the best in her country. She also came from a titled family and her father was a very important businessman with government connections. She was reluctant to interview at all and answered my questions in a superficial manner. She thought she should just be offered the position! I was so angry (although I did not show it) that I immediately decided not to pass her excellent resume on. – Director of Technical Recruiting, Semiconductor firm (para. 2).*

He went on to suggest that even though most North American recruiters have a fundamental understanding that people differ, a presupposition of most is that individual interviewees have adapted western culture and are knowledgeable of operating principles of organizations in the western world. The employment interview is an important source for information and remains, by far, the most frequently used employment selection and decision-making device in organizations (Eder & Harris, 1999; Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002).

Employment interviews are a traditional component of most organizations' human resource management selection systems. Research has been conducted on the employment interview for almost a century (Eder & Harris, 1999). Interview scholars have been interested in a wide range of topics over the years, including psychometric properties of the interview as a measurement device, interview format and type, organization-person-job fit, and interviewer cognition and decision-making processes. However, more cross-cultural interview research examining the effects of culture and applicant demographic characteristics as cues affecting interviewer cultural assumptions and employment decision are needed. Research needs to probe beyond the assumptions and simple demographic category effects to investigate potential underlying reasons for what are observed as misconceptions and poor judgments. Such cultural misunderstandings will unfortunately lead interviewers to erroneously reject candidates (Kristof-Brown, Barrick & Franke 2002; Ployhart, 2006).

With increased interest in organization-person-job fit in the interview, there has come a realization that the homogenization effects from such assessments, which drive employment decisions, potentially could account for discrimination effects. Researchers have attempted to define the concept

of “fit” to be a less subjective measure and to identify candidate fit with the organization’s culture and politics (Judge and Ferris 1992). However, there is still need to know much more about the perceptual cues correlated with applicants of different races and ethnicities that might be driving these assessments, judgments, and employment decisions.

Hiring the right person is important for hospitality organizations since they are highly service oriented and many would rather remain understaffed than employ just anyone walking through the doors of the organization. Segalla, Sauquet & Turati (2001) posits that among many European companies, this is an indication of considerable deficit in nearly all areas of graduate recruitment. They further pointed out that in a recent study a 9.1 per cent average shortfall was found across six recruitment areas. One way they identified that individual organizations can improve their access to high quality employees is to recruit internationally (Segalla, *et al.* 2001).

The basis of integrating a cross cultural model of understanding in interviews is in overcoming “assumptions”. Assumptions refer to a number of inter-related elements. Interviewers assume what should or should not happen, what is normal and what is not, and what is right or wrong. Assumptions also speak to what an individual’s physical appearance says about him/her, what the non-verbal cues communicate about his/her level of confidence, how the individual communicates and how he/she presents him/herself (Payne 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

The research strategy will be descriptive-exploratory, and the methodology used will be constructivist grounded theory, as characterized by (Charmaz, 2000). Constructivism is a research paradigm that rejects the existence of an objective reality. In constructivist grounded theory both the researcher and research participants interpret meaning and actions. Michael Quinn Patton describes it this way:

Because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality – indeed, they cannot do otherwise – the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense, as the sun is real, but is ‘made up’ and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs. . . . *What is defined or perceived by people as real is real in its consequences.* (Patton, 2002, p. 96).

In this study a combination of both subjective and empirical methods of data analyses is deemed appropriate to explore cross cultural issues in job interviewing, to understand how hiring the wrong person can negatively affect businesses, discover ways to improve behavioral interviewing techniques and policy implications. The research will be mostly interview-based. Relevant documents will also be utilized in order to corroborate any information gathered.

## EXPECTED RESULTS

Recruitment within a universal context is a complex issue and HR managers need to exercise care in carrying out recruitment activities in different cultural contexts. National culture may be an important moderator of relationships between recruitment practices and outcomes across all phases of the recruitment process. By taking different cultural values into consideration, organizations may be able to have an advantage over competitors when building up the most important resources of organizations, their people. The expectations of the proposed research are as follows:

- To provoke awareness and understanding of cross-cultural difference

- Identification of existing of cultural misconception
- Greater sensitivity to multiculturalism in recruitment and hiring practices and
- The development of strategies to ameliorate misunderstanding/misconceptions of cultural differences in recruiting and hiring in the form of :-
  - Sensitivity training ( for e.g. mock cross-cultural interviews and scenario team role play
  - Review of recruitment procedure and issues of cultural profiling.

Therefore, by having a better understanding of cultural values and behaviours, recruiters may make informed hiring decisions. Finally, future studies may consider addressing different areas of human resources practices and culture, like selection, orientation and retention. It would be interesting to see the impact organizational culture has on cross-cultural selection and orientation activities as well as retention.