

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES OF EMPLOYEES IN POLAND: SELECTED RESULTS OF NATIONAL SURVEY

EWA MATUSKA, BEATA KOWAL-RUDNICKA

Abstract

The paper consists with two parts describing some features of the intercultural competences of Polish employees. Selected statistical data published in official national sources were used in a first part to verify the hypothesis that general intercultural awareness of working Poles is determined by current socio-economic conditions. Data indicating on intensive temporary work migration and frequent work executed abroad as delegations from domestic companies were interpreted as the confirmation for a put assumptions. In a second part of the article were used selected results obtained in a national online survey conducted in 2017 on the representative sample (N = 1,140) of Polish employees working in different sectors and in different types of organizations. In a qualitative analysis of respondents' answers for selected questions of questionnaire were discovered that most valued components of intercultural competence, in case of Polish employees, are subjectively perceived elements of own life experience – the ability to learn from own experience and ability to deal with new situations. The most important gap of intercultural competence occurred to be the knowledge of the historical and social conditions of other countries.

Keywords: competence of employees, intercultural competence, socio-economic factors of intercultural competence development.

Classification JEL: M12 – Personnel Management; M14 – Corporate Culture, Diversity.

1. Introduction

Contemporary employees transform their roles, functions and tasks together with the change of the business milieu. The signs of this change are globalization, fierce competition between companies, massive mobility of workforce extremely straightened by immigration from politically insecure parts of the world, mismatches between labor supply and demand and intensive searching for talents, digitalization allowing for teleworking and elastic forms of work, and many other. All of these factors, socio-economic in their nature, play important role in growing up awareness of necessity of implementing diversity management as a strategic direction in human resources management strategies. One of most important diversity example is expression of different cultures and ethnicities covered in notion of *intercultural competence* (Deardorff, 2011).

Intercultural competence description is used in this paper as the example of the kind of transversal competences, which are essential today to perform with success on a scope of different kinds of positions and functions in organizations. Adequate literature review of already done research in domain of intercultural competencies is impossible in limited space of the article, thus authors have willingly resigned from theoretical consideration of this issue of indicating only some most cited authors and their works. Instead of this, as the paper is focused on evaluation of main features of intercultural competence revealed by employees in Poland – necessary was to introduce at least general description of most important socio-economic factors which shape today intercultural awareness of Poles. Just these determinants were used by authors as the basis for hypothesis of their first part of research.

The second part of the paper reports key results obtained from national survey dedicated to the role and content of intercultural competences of the persons employed in different kinds of Polish organizations and in different sectors of economy. The survey had been conducted during 2017 year with the tool of questionnaire developed in common research approach of the international academic net “*Human Development Potential in Central and Eastern European*

Countries States”, adopted by authors of the paper to Polish language and to online version¹. The core results, obtained from representative sample of employees (N = 1,140), had been analyzed statistically and some of them also – via using quality analysis approach methods.

This paper presents only part of the results addressed to verifying hypothesis that employees in Poland are sufficiently aware the value of cultural diversity and necessity to cooperate at work with representatives of different cultures. This expression is present both in private and public sector of economy and among workers employed on different positions and the main assumptions for it are of socio-economic nature and including few most significant factors, namely:

- Polish people frequently communicate with foreigners – staying in a country, performing their work in Poland or abroad, or when travelling (including private travels);
- Polish companies systematically broaden their engagement abroad in the form of shares, branches or plants opening (102.9 % in 2016 compare to 2015²);
- Changes on Polish labor market – lowest (6,8% in Feb. 2018) unemployment level for last 26 years³ and lack of sufficient workforce persuades domestic companies to employ people from abroad (mainly from Ukraine);
- Common foreign career experiences of Polish people – systematically broadens group of Polish citizens who temporary or permanently works abroad and collects experiences of cooperation with people of different cultures.

2. The role and content of intercultural competence

Since publishing groundbreaking works of Geert Hofstede about IBM company and differences of acting of its divisions in different parts of globe (1980, 1988, 1991), we know that even the same kind of business is profoundly influenced by organizational culture represented by its employees. His works dedicated to specification cultural dimensions explaining national models of working and conducting businesses in various countries brings basic classical knowledge for international business practitioners. Culture today is perceived as most important ‘soft’ tool of management (Kostera & Śliwa, 2012: 12), especially sensitive in case of planning and implementing change management. One of the most known theorist of the culture, Edgar Schein (2010: 24) identifies three levels of culture:

- *Artefacts* (visible, for example: rituals, ceremonies, language, norms) – most easy to recognize and learn;
- *Espoused beliefs and values* (may appear through surveys in form of opinions); and
- *Basic underlying assumptions* (unconscious taken for granted beliefs and values: these are not visible) – most important and influencing activity of individuals and groups.

All levels of culture are reflected in organizational cultures of entities, culture of teams, and culture of individuals. Any kind of cooperation or even co-habitation of the representatives of various cultures creates the situation of mutual intercultural influence.

The frequency and intensity of intercultural interactions has increased profoundly during last few decades due to globalization which is considered main reason enhancing “*the need for intercultural awareness, understanding, and training at all levels of business*” (Sorrells, 2013:

¹ Online version of questionnaire still available under address: <http://intercultural.network/>

² Data of Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Poland, online: <http://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/podmioty-gospodarcze-wyniki-finansowe/przedsiębiorstwa-niefinansowe/dzialalnosc-podmiotow-posiadajacych-jednostki-zagraniczne-w-2016-roku,27,1.html>

³ Data of Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Poland, online: stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stopa-bezrobocia-wyrownane-sezonowo-latach-2011-2018,5,1.html

33–35). Today nobody doubts that cultural differences play a significant role in team building, decision-making, negotiations, marketing, and advertising. Moreover, in spite of discussion among economists, there is strong evidence that global competitiveness of companies is also strongly determined by intercultural factors (*Prahalad & Hamel, 2001; Petersen et al., 2008*).

The second decade of XIX century has brought a lot of new challenges for economy: global long lasting economic crisis which have caused massive work migration, hardly controlled wave of refugees incoming to Europe, digitalization of businesses and cybersecurity threats. All these factors had created highly intercommunicative architecture of today organizations, profoundly influenced the way employees are filling their roles, functions and tasks, and put new questions how built organizational processes to gain most profits and avoid new risks.

From human resources management and international management points of view, interacting effectively and appropriately across cultures is today a fundamental requirement for individuals employed both in foreign entities and also in domestic ones, which more and more often operate in global economic environment. Those people should demonstrate “*the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes*” (*Deardorff, 2006: 247*). This attribute is called *intercultural competence* and represents research area of anthropology and management. Alternative terms include: intercultural communicative competence, transcultural communication, cross-cultural adaptation, or intercultural sensitivity.

The notion of intercultural competence is very complex and there were proposed at least several theoretical approaches to conceptualize it. Such trial is proposed for example in UNESCO report (2013). One of frequently used definitions of specifies intercultural competence as “*the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts*” (*Bennett & Bennett, 2004: 149*). As three dimensions of the ‘competence’ – factual/conceptual (knowledge), operational (skills), and behavioral (attitudes) – are agreed by some authors as necessary for adequate description of any competence reflected ineffective organizational behavior (*Boyatzis & Goleman, 1999; Filipowicz, 2004; Campion et al., 2011*) – it counts also in case of intercultural competency. This way of interpretation of this notion we can extract from most popular definitions of intercultural competency, following the work of Vladimiras Gražulis (2016: 64) who enumerates most common features of personal multicultural competence in a following way:

- Awareness of cultural features of an ethnic group, its history, values, the belief system, tolerant attitude towards people from a different culture;
- A conscious understanding and sensitivity to another ethnic group, which includes openness, flexibility and empathy for people from other cultures;
- The ability to motivate to work in an intercultural environment;
- Awareness of how to build good relations between different cultural groups;
- The ability to solve intercultural problems synergistically.

The communication opportunities with people of other cultures provides background for developing intercultural competence, but according to some authors (*e.g. Fantini, 2006*), the process of acquiring intercultural competence is the lifelong issue. Other author – D. K. Deardorff (2009) claims that only proficiency in a foreign language is not distinct feature of being inter-culturally competent, because, although is very useful, it is not the only element of intercultural competence.

To sum up, intercultural competences are not only the kind of interpersonal ones but include important cognitive and behavioral components. The current workforce changes show the important role of these skills are in different business processes and that most probably the demand for inter-culturally competent employees will be growing up in next years. All of it

suggest they should be given more attention in general human resource management and personnel policy of organizations.

2. Socio-economic background of intercultural competence development in Poland

The main assumption of socio-economic conditions in Poland indirectly involved in creating good background for intercultural competence development obviously is macroeconomic index reflected as the rate of general unemployment. This is the lowest since time of economic transformation noted for the end of 90s of XX century. The illustration of changes in registered rate of unemployment in years 2011–2017 shows Figure 1.

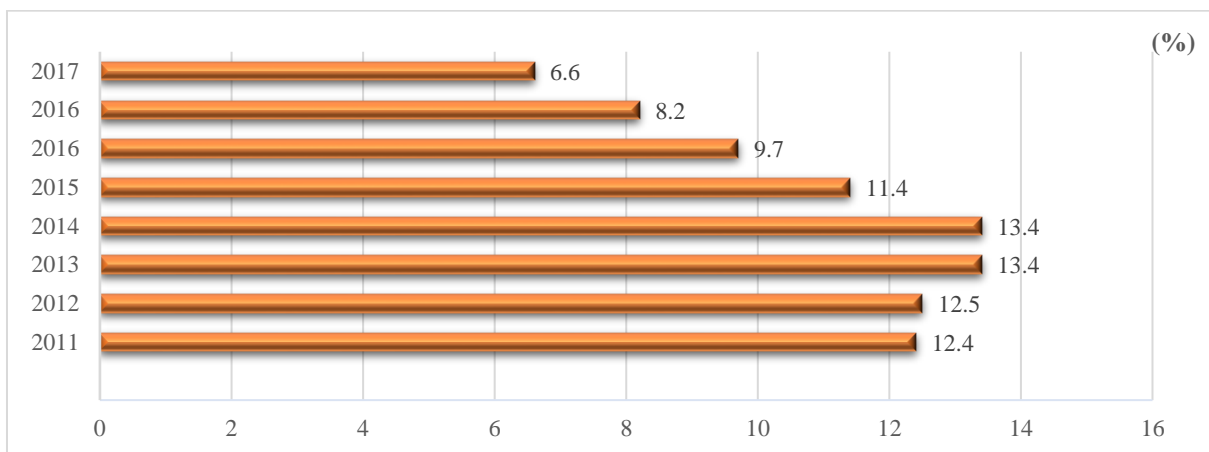


Figure 1. The rate of registered unemployment on the end of the year: 2011–2017
(Source: Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Poland, 2018, online: stat.gov.pl/)

Job places are created by domestic entities both in a country, as well in a global labor market – particularly in Europe, but also in US (Figure 2). Employees from Poland are often delegated to work abroad for a different time periods, sometimes regularly (i.e. in transport sector).

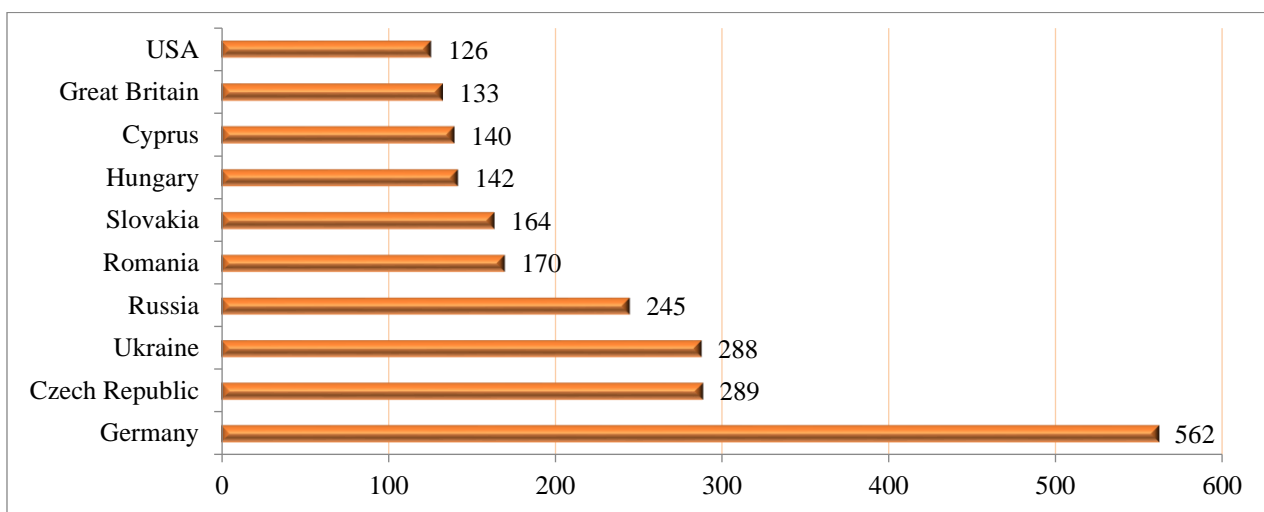


Figure 2. The number of foreign departments according to their destinations in 2016
(Source: Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Poland, 2018, online: stat.gov.pl/)

Polish citizens don't work only in Poland because the salaries obtained for the same work in western Europe are much higher, however they take abroad work usually only as temporary contract. According to data of Central Statistical Office in Poland on the end of 2016⁴, there were temporarily around 2,515 thousand inhabitants of the country working outside of Poland, i.e. by 118 thousand (4.7%) more than in 2015. In Europe in 2016 there were employed about 2,214 thousand people, the vast majority – about 2,096 thousand – in EU Member States. This number increased by 113 thousand compared to 2015. Among the EU countries, the largest number of Polish work emigrants resided in Great Britain (788,000), Germany (687,000), the Netherlands (116 thousand) and Ireland (112 thousand). In 2016, in spite of the Brexit, there was a significant increase in the number of Poles staying in Great Britain and in Germany that is in the main destination countries of work emigration from Poland in recent years. This intensive workforce mobility is surely an opportunity for collecting intercultural experiences of Polish employees.

Also, domestic companies systematically broaden their businesses operations in foreign countries. As an economic subject registered in a country they employ native co-workers and timely delegate them abroad. According to the latest data of the Central Statistical Office (information from 30/03 2018), at the end of 2016, 1,716 of Polish entities confirmed ownership of shares, branches or plants abroad (compared to 2015 an increase of approx. 3%).

The Figure 3 shows progressive trend of international business activity of Polish entities.

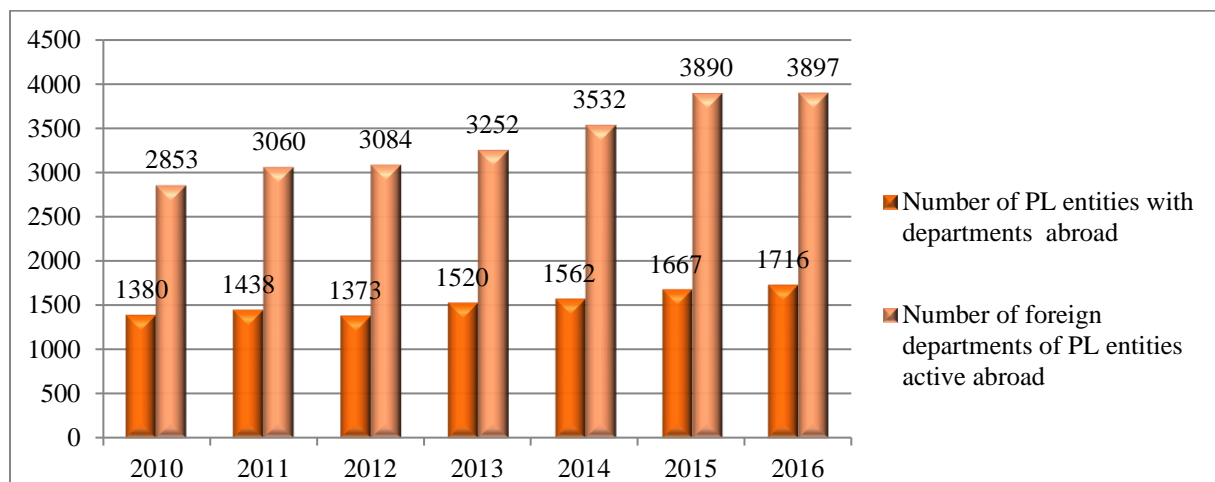


Figure 3. The Polish entities active abroad and their foreign departments in years 2010–2016
(Source: Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Poland, Activity of entities holding foreign units in 2016; Information from 30/03 2018, PDF: p. 1)

In the surveyed population of enterprises with registered offices in Poland and having foreign structures have dominated small companies, i.e. with the number of employees not exceeding 50 persons (40.3% of all entities). Little less (32.4%) were represented medium-sized enterprises (employing from 50 to 249 working persons) and the large entities (with 250 and more employed) have consisted of 27.3% of total amount of entities. In 2016, entities belonging to groups of enterprises with foreign entities were accounted for 80.7% of all surveyed entities (1,385 units). All facts foreseen above can be used as arguments confirming assumption about primary impact of socio-economic conditions on promoting intercultural competence of workforce in Poland. The state of the development of this competence was the main aim of the own study described in a further part.

⁴ <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosc/informacja-o-rozmiarach-i-kierunkach-emigracji-z-polski-w-latach-20042016,2,10.html>

3. Method

The study on the expression of intercultural competences in the present paper is based on the critical analysis of scientific literature on this topic and of the own authors' research study conducted during 2017 year. The main research hypothesis was that, together with some specific for Poland macroeconomic determinants, as:

- Significant index of work mobility for Polish citizens (cc. 2,5 million working in west countries of EU);
- Low level of unemployment (ab. 8% in 2016, under 7% in year 2017) and transformation towards market of employees;
- Problems of domestic companies with filling vacancies and their growing openness to employ workers from abroad (mainly from Ukraine, cc. 1,5 million in 2017);

should grow the individual awareness about the importance of the intercultural cooperation in work and consideration about role of intercultural competence.

3.1. Characteristics of survey

The *aim of the study* was to explore the recognition of meaning and content of intercultural competences of the people currently working in different kinds of organizations in Poland. As the research method was used online questionnaire on the representative sample of Polish employees including both persons employed on a line, managerial positions, as well as self-employed, both workers of private, public and mixed organizations. The whole study consisted with two parts: first focused on collecting opinions of employees about the need of development of multicultural work surroundings and intercultural competences of employees, and second one was dedicated to evaluation of the *status quo* of intercultural competences of managers.

For the aim of this paper are used only selected data of the first part of the study which were using ten multiply choice questions allowed to reveal the main characteristics of recognition of the content and meaning of intercultural competence among investigated employees.

The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of scientific works of researchers who have described the scope of the content of intercultural competence concept (*Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Keršienė & Savanevičienė, 2005; Sinicrope et al., 2007; Risager, 2007; Fantini, 2009; Deardorff, 2011; Blaškova & Blaško, 2015; Dubkėvičs et al., 2015; Gražulis, 2016*). The questions were composed in a way to cover most common distinguishing criteria of intercultural competence as terms consisted with adequate knowledge, attitudes, skills and cultural awareness. To analyze the respondents' views on cultural diversity and the intercultural competence was used a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 corresponds to evaluations 'very important' and 'I totally agree', whereas 1 corresponds to 'unimportant' or 'disagree'. For the purposes of this paper obtained data were taken under qualitative analysis and percentage frequencies of particular answers were calculated.

The sample of the respondents was sufficiently wide (N = 1,140) and was collected from all of 16 regions of Poland. Moreover, it controlled criterions of gender, education, sector of economy and composition of the sizes of entities. The demographic characteristics of the participants of the quantitative analysis reveal that 40.4% (460 persons) have secondary education, 18.7% (213 persons) have completed bachelor degree, 39.6% (452 respondents) have Master degree and 1.3% (15 persons) – doctorate. Under 25 years of age were 14% (155 persons), in age of 25–35: 33% (380 persons), between 35–50 years were 37% (420 respondents), and over 50 years 16% (185 persons). From the viewpoint of sex, there were 55% of women (628) and 45% of men (512). Less than 1 year of work experience had only 9.2% (105 persons), till 5 years: 20.6% (235), and majority have worked more than 5 years: 70.2% (800 persons). In public sector were employed 40.4% (460 persons), in private

50.4% (574 persons), in NGOs (non-governmental organizations) 5.4 % (61persons) and in other 3.9% (45 respondents). The criterion of the size of the organization where respondents were currently employed was as follow: 45% (515persons) worked in small entities, 25% in medium sized ones, and 30% (340 respondents) in large organizations. Details of the structure and scope of all demographic features of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic attributes of respondents (own study)

Attribute	Education of respondents (N = 1,140)								Total respondents	
	Secondary		Bachelor		Master		PhD.			
Age in years	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%
< 25	126	11.1	17	1.5	12	1.1	0	0.0	155	13.6
25 to 35	153	13.4	88	7.7	139	12.2	0	0.0	380	33.3
35 to 50	122	10.7	77	6.8	216	18.9	5	0.4	420	36.8
50 <	59	5.2	31	2.7	85	7.5	10	0.9	185	16.2
Sector of employment										
Public	146	12.8	95	8.3	204	17.9	15	1.3	460	40.4
Private	283	24.8	101	8.9	191	16.8	0	0.0	574	50.4
NGOs	16	1.4	11	1.0	33	2.9	0	0.0	61	5.4
Not specified	15	1.3	6	0.5	24	2.1	0	0.0	45	3.9
Organization's size										
Small (<50 employees)	242	21.2	91	8.0	182	16.0	0	0.0	515	45.2
Medium (50 to 250)	112	9.8	61	5.4	112	9.8	0	0.0	285	25.0
Large (> 250 employees)	106	9.3	61	5.4	158	13.9	15	1.3	340	29.8
Length of work experience in years										
< 1	86	7.5	15	1.3	4	0.4	0	0.0	105	9.2
1 to 5	128	11.2	50	4.4	57	5.0	0	0.0	235	20.6
5 <	246	21.6	148	13.0	391	34.3	15	1.3	800	70.2
Gender										
Women	281	24.6	129	11.3	214	18.8	5	0.4	628	55.1
Men	179	15.7	84	7.4	238	20.9	10	0.9	512	44.9

Additionally, it was controlled the professional status of respondents according their general position/profession, what presents Figure 4.

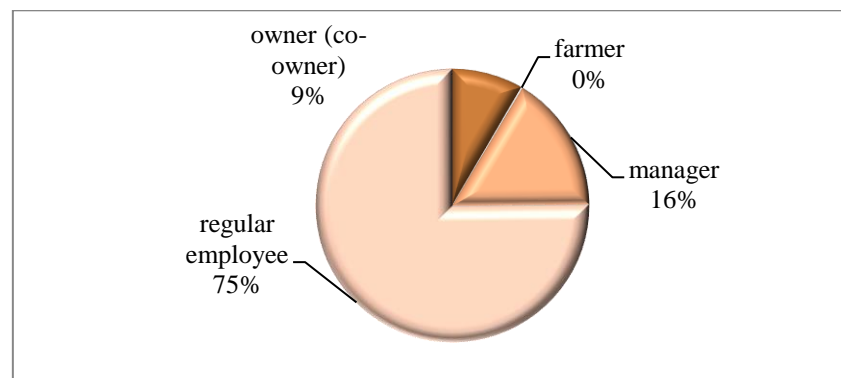


Figure 4. The structure of respondents according held position (own study)

The gender structure of Polish society in mid of 2015 year was 48% of men and 52% of women (*GUS, 2018*), the average paid employment in 2017 was: 33.3% in public sector and 66.7% in private sector, including NGOs and agriculture (*Zelazny et al., 2017: 24*). The structure of the size of entities in Poland on the end of 2017 was as it presents Figure 5.

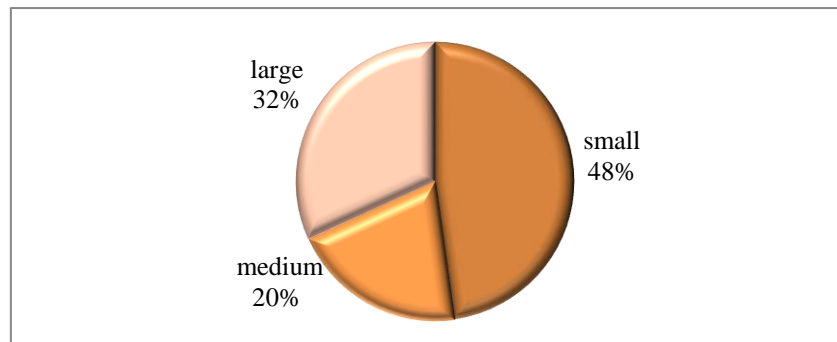


Figure 5. Structure of entities in PL according to criterion of the size, XII of 2017 (own study)

All above data allows to conclude that chosen sample was well comparable to current statistic characteristics of the Polish population (*GUS, 2018*) and consider it as a representative group of employees in Poland, selected with aimed (not random) approach. The aimed approach to the sample selection was determined with the use of online research tool. The information about online questionnaire and invitation to attend in survey was disseminated through social network channels and mailing organizations and chambers of enterprises. Thus, revealed results of the study should adequately disclose the current situation of the development of intercultural competence in Poland.

3.2. Research results and discussion

In the course of evaluation intercultural competences of Polish employees in the context of their everyday work reality, the sample was asked to answer ten one choice or multiply choice questions. First questions (1–4 one choice questions) were dedicated to the frequency and geographical orientation of *respondents' communication with foreigners* during performing their work and also in a free time. Respondents have showed that communication with foreign people in connection with their work is normal practice for 73% of them and only 1/3 of employed people don't have such opportunity (Figure 6). Moreover, 33% of investigated few times yearly, and 47% one-a year privately travel abroad. Almost 52% of respondents travel abroad at least one-time monthly filling work tasks, although 48% at all not do it (Figure 7).

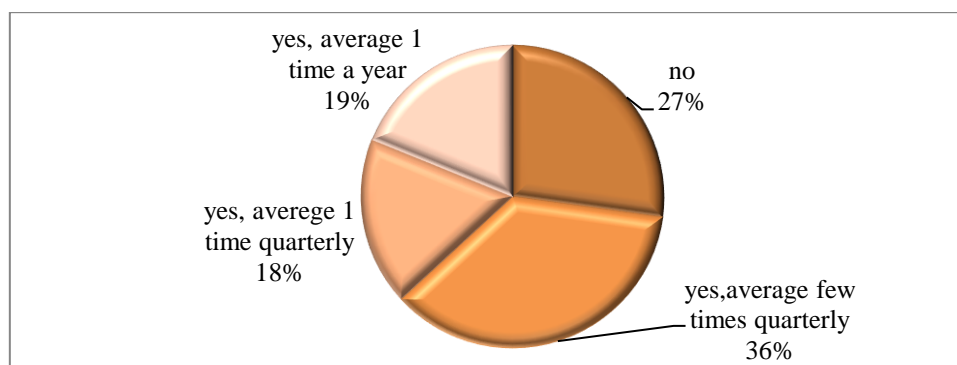


Figure 6. Do you communicate with people of other nationalities at work? (own study)

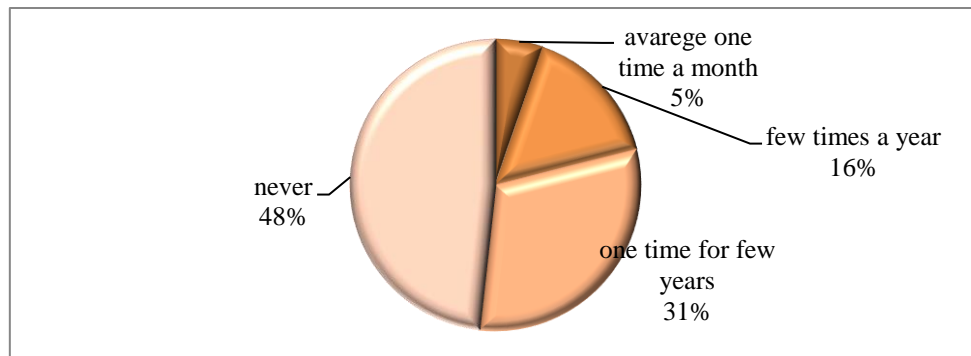


Figure 7. How often do you travel abroad in connection with your work? (own study)

Most frequent destination of work travels are:

- Western Europe UE member countries (France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom) – 605 (31%) of respondents;
- Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and others) – 375 (19%);
- Northern Europe (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and others) – 265 (14%);
- Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria and others) – 230 (12%);
- Southern Europe (Italy, Greece and others) – 155 (8%);
- North America (Canada, USA and others) – 100 (ab. 5%);
- The Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) – 85 (4%).

Answers of respondents delivered for the above questions seem well correspond to the hypothesis that today's globalized work circumstances which imply frequent meetings with foreigners inevitable creates chances for shaping their basic intercultural competency. The most common area where this competency is collected is Europe. The basic information about the content of intercultural competency of respondents' can be extracted from their answers for the following question: *Please, assess which elements of intercultural competence are most important in your work environment?* The quantitative analysis (using ranking evaluation) of answers collected for this question is presented in a Table 2 and in Figure 7.

Table 2. Ranking elements of intercultural competence in working environment (own study)

Element of intercultural competence (n = 9)	Index in number and %				
	Very important	Rather important	Neutral	Rather non-important	Non-important
Knowledge of the International Business Protocol	230	350	220	130	210
Knowledge of foreign language(s)	570	240	190	80	60
Knowledge of the principles of good manners	650	330	100	35	25
Knowledge of the historical and social conditions of another country	220	395	255	150	120
Flexibility	470	410	200	30	30
Ability to deal with new situations	625	375	90	25	25
Ability to learn from experience	655	340	85	35	25
Tolerance for cultural and racial differences	605	310	125	55	45
Respect for the values of other cultures	615	305	120	55	45

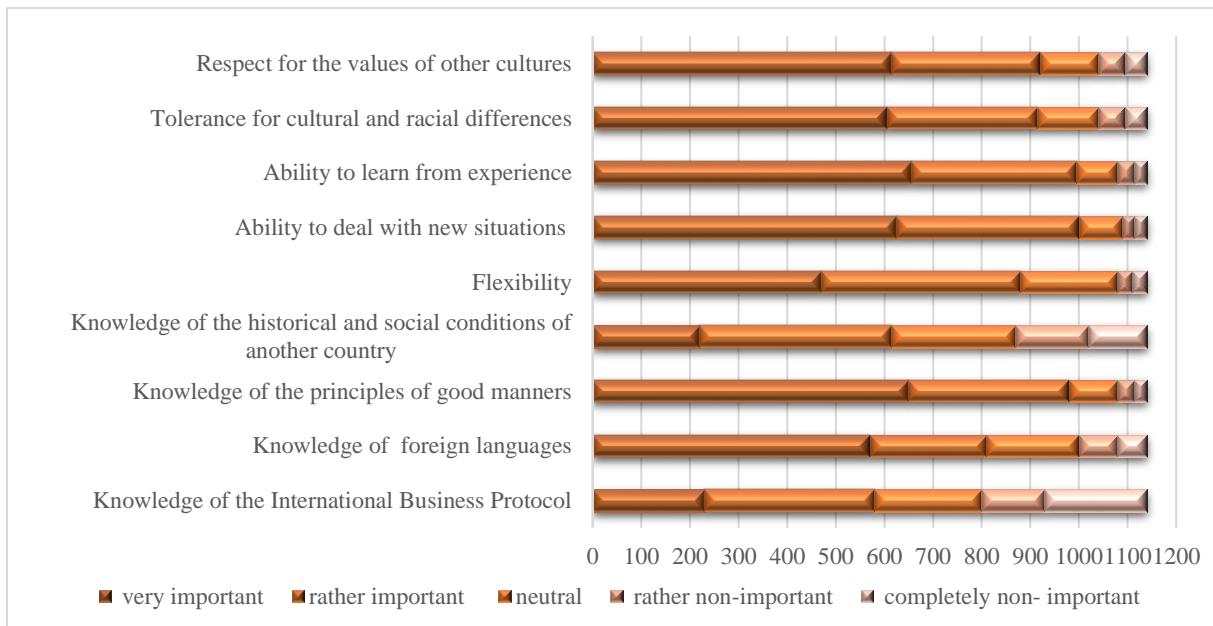


Figure 7. Intensity of evaluation of the elements of the intercultural competence in working environment by Polish employees (own study)

According to rank analysis, the most valued component of the intercultural competence among investigated group of Polish employees are:

- Ability to learn from experience (rank 1);
- Ability to deal with new situations(rank 2);
- Knowledge of the principles of good manners (rank 3).

Least important occurred to be:

- Knowledge of the international business protocol (rank 9);
- Knowledge of the historical and social conditions of another country (rank 8);
- Knowledge of foreign language(s), (rank 7).

Some intermediate values achieved such components as: respect for the values of other cultures (rank4), tolerance for cultural and racial differences (rank 5), flexibility (rank 6).

Above results can be assumed as confirming the hypothesis that generally awareness of intercultural competence comes together with own work experience and tasks filled at work. The main opportunity for development of intercultural awareness in Poland was created by its membership in European Union community what opened the new work destinations and have changed the ways employees perform their work. Majority of contacts and communicating events with foreigners of Polish employees take place in borders of the Europe, mainly with EU member countries.

The employees consider the knowledge about good manners is more important as compared with the knowledge of business protocol. Alarming signal seems to be that majority of respondents not value the knowledge of historical and social conditions of another country. They not care also so much about the ability to communicate in foreign languages. Commenting this result, we can agree with the fact the foreign language skills of Poles, especially middle-aged (but not the young generation) are not at the level of satisfaction. It is mostly due to outdated system of language education at schools and surely should be definitely improved. However, language proficiency is only the technical tool and it is not a component of intercultural competency (Deardoff, 2009). More valued by employees are: the respect for values of other cultures and tolerance for cultural and racial differences. And the most valued

components of the intercultural competence are: individual perception, ability to learn from own experience and to deal with new situations.

Discussed results swell correspond to the model of the competence content developed in theory (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Risager, 2007). Moreover, about two million of Polish citizens successfully employed during last decade on labor markets of west Europe and significant amount of work migrants to another foreign country – are the best empirical proof for it.

The general picture of development of intercultural competences of Polish employees can be assumed as *intermediately optimistic* and it seemed to be basically driven by current socio-economic circumstances, which create many opportunities for work mobility and for meeting people from different cultures.

5. Conclusions

The acquiring and developing intercultural competence by Polish workforce is the ongoing process and connected with current socio-economic conditions. Among them most important seem to be high work mobility of Poles. Many of them work abroad temporarily, many other are delegated by domestic entities to fill their professional tasks in its foreign divisions, mainly in Europe. They have quite lot opportunities to meet and cooperate with people of other countries as well cultures.

Investigated via online questionnaire respondents being representative sample of Polish employees have showed they perceive intercultural competence on the first place as the input to developing ability to learn from own experience and to deal with new situations. To this subjective point of the view can be added two diagnosed important objective statements addressed to the content of intercultural competency: the respect for values of other cultures and tolerance for cultural and racial differences. The technical skills including knowledge of foreign languages and business protocol are not considered as important for the intercultural competency what fits to the interpretation existing in literature.

On the basis of the implemented national survey can be concluded moderately optimistic picture of the awareness of the intercultural competence among Polish employees. Although there were also discovered areas on which should be placed more attention, like for example – on the knowledge of the historical and social conditions of other countries. Revealed in a survey subjective perspective in perception of the role of cultural competence at work seems also confirm the put hypothesis about important impact of the currently existing socio-economic conditions on individual evaluation of the possibility to cooperate with people coming from different cultures.

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Addresses of authors:

Dr. Ewa MATUSKA, PhD
Management and Safety Sciences Faculty
Pomeranian University
Kozietulski Str.6
76- 200 Słupsk
Poland
e-mail: ewa.matuska@apsl.edu.pl

Mgr. Beata KOWAL-RUDNICKA, MBA
Management and Safety Sciences Faculty
Pomeranian University
Kozietulski Str.6
76- 200 Słupsk
Poland
e-mail: beata.kowal-rudnicka@apsl.edu.pl