

Intercultural communication on the workplace

Intercultural communication is defined as a set of interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds, which consists of a process of exchanging, negotiating and mediating cultural differences through language, non-verbal gestures and space relationships. Here are some tips to help manage intercultural communication and manage cross-cultural misunderstandings/conflicts.

1. Embrace cultural diversity

A diverse workforce presents challenges in terms of religion, customs and communication. In these situations, it is important to not just accept intercultural differences, but fully embrace them across the entire workplace. **Promoting diversity** at the workplace requires efforts by everyone but is fundamental.

Developing and implementing a **diversity and intercultural training program** throughout the company is a great step, these programmes should be provided to all the employers of the company or organization, regardless of their origin. It is important to have specific training for migrants and refugees, in which they are told what the cultural customs of the host country and specific training for local employees in order to work on prejudice and embracing the diversity. The training sessions for both refugees and employees are led by external experts.

It is not unusual to have some issues at work because of conflicts, misunderstandings or unfortunate events at work that are due to cultural differences. Certain rules and values are often very different in different cultural groups, such as the oft-quoted punctuality or gender equality, and also the strict separation of work and private lives. Even with their best will, it can sometimes take quite some time, especially for adult refugees, to get used to their new circumstances. In the light of these difficulties, these **intercultural trainings for refugees** are very valuable.

Because the issue of refugees is sometimes associated with fear or prejudice among the general public the intercultural trainings for local employees are an important element for a positive labour inclusion. The main element of this is that all employees in whose departments refugees are working are given one day of intensive training. The aim of this is to sensitise the employees and boost their intercultural skills.

Moreover, the EU *Platform of Diversity Charters* encourages organisations to develop and implement diversity and inclusion policies. By signing a charter, the organisation voluntarily commits to promote diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace.

2. Promote open communication and overcome language barriers

When employees are from different parts of the world **good communication** means everything. It is important to have a good system in place to communicate tasks and progress. Situations like this can

have a lot of roadblocks and miscommunications, especially when a **language barrier** exists. For the refugees that are not fluent in local language is important to provide languages courses and mentor them at the beginning.

Technology also presents significant opportunities for **language learning**, and for improving educational, training and employment outcomes. It is recommended to use apps as simple and accessible as possible (free of charge, mainly using a mobile device, with an easy interface), such as free online dictionaries, translators, pictograms or grammar and syntax apps, to be used not only by refugees or newcomers, but also by the rest of workers, as the best way to overcome language barriers and enhance two-way communication.

Following there is a list of Apps to communicate in a foreign language that includes from pictogram-based solutions to digital vocabulary flashcards.

Tandem	ABBY Lingvo Dictionaries	GoldenDict	Multi Language Translator
Image It	Bravolol	Redigo	Hello Talk.

To improve the two-way communication, a useful action could be as well the translation of the signals of the departments, rooms, tools, into the main languages of migrants and refugees workers, as a way of promoting inclusion and learning the language of the host country in the workplace.

3. Foster strong relationships among workers

Team-building is often an overlooked part of the business world. Building meaningful relationships among employees is important for the **social inclusion of refugees**, to keep everyone engaged in their work and performing group tasks efficiently. One of the actions can be starting by setting up weekly face-to-face calls for employees to go over their progress and catch up. In fact, bringing people together from completely different backgrounds to work toward the same goal is what **makes humans grow as a collective**. The key is to promote meaningful communication and the ability to seamlessly integrate cultures, to see the big picture.

4. Effective conflict resolution strategies

Discussions and controversial situations sometimes are due to cultural differences at the workplace. Conflict is a form of social interaction in which substantive disagreements arise between two or more individuals which gives rise to an affective or emotional reaction, often based on a perception of threat or interference by one or more other parties to the disagreement. Conflicts in the workplace can arise because of the cultural differences in values and norms of behaviour of people from different cultures. People usually act according to their cultural values and norms. The interaction with colleagues and co-workers with a different worldview (cultural differences) might make them to interpret behaviours from an opposite standpoint.

These situations are usually interpreted on the basis of patterned responses, in terms of personal characteristics. During a conflictual interaction, individuals adapt their responses toward negotiating disagreements and dealing with emotional upset. That is, individuals respond not to personal patterns but to behavioural orientations based on cultural characteristics. They use interpretive frames within which individuals make meaningful messages, and behaviours arise from interaction with the other party. From this perspective, cultural differences at the workplace can be faced by

means of providing colleagues and co-workers with the appropriate frame to interpret own and other behaviours. That is, facilitate the right tools to understand the manner in which contending parties communicate with one another around substantive disagreements and their emotional or affective reaction to one another.

5. Enabling intercultural communication in the working context

Following are listed some examples of activities that companies have carried out to enable intercultural communication and therefore to minimize cross-cultural misunderstandings/conflicts.

In 2017, the European Commission launched the initiative *Employers together for integration* to give visibility to what employers are doing to support the integration of refugees and other migrants into the labour market and so, favour understanding their background. Companies can join this initiative and share their experiences so they can serve as model to other companies.

Some activities promoted by companies are:

- Round tables between employees with and without migrant backgrounds. This activity allows workers to better know each other in a more informal context and exchange information about their professional lives, background, expectations, etc. Some companies have also rooms designed for that purpose and schedule the activity within the working day.
- Buddy (tutor/mentor) programmes. An employee mentors a newcomer during his/her starting period in the company. See more details in section “Success stories”.
- Volunteering through acknowledgment via special leave to staff who support integration outside work via volunteering.

These three activities are developed by Deutsche Telekom in Germany and International Research Centre for Intercultural Studies in UK.

- Welcome Plan for mutual understanding. In the Spanish company Agromartín S.L., managers have developed a welcome plan, which starts from the arrival of immigrants covering the whole process. It is based on a first contact with the worker at arrival where there is an exchange of information between the group of immigrants and the personnel officer for mutual understanding, respecting cultural codes. After that, some basic aspects are taken into account (age, knowledge of the language, occupation) in order to place them in the different working groups. New workers are assigned a coach to teach them the tasks they have to do and training courses, both mandatory and optional are organised. The worker is also provided with a guide of basic rules including particularities about housing, working hours, code of conduct, waste, telephones of public institutions, to make their stay in the farm easier.



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