Intercultural Obstacles Within a Multicultural Workplace
Case Study:
A Group of Egyptian Companies

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Abstract:

This study was put to examine the different intercultural obstacles that are occurring in a multicultural workplace, as establishing a work environment along with individuals coming from several aspects of the globe stimulates a variety of cultural obstacles that give the managers an urgent requirement to think about their staff members' cultural backgrounds, and incite the workers to get adapted to various perspectives on what things look like when they interact with their managers.

On this basis, we focused on only three main variables: time, gender equity, as well as, customs and traditions, which in turn are able actually to create the root of intercultural difficulties. After conducting a survey addressed to employees, and interviewing the managers, the three variables are found to be significant factors in a multicultural workplace. However, their impact importance is varied.

Keywords: Intercultural obstacles, Multicultural workplace, Time, Gender equity, Customs and traditions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Presently in all over the globe, individuals work increasingly in a multicultural atmosphere where there are coworkers from every place in the globe. This as a result, in fact carries brand-new obstacles which are mainly related to the aim of comprehending and grasping fully the barriers, difficulties, as well as the problems which are present within a cross-cultural work environment. It is very essential to act properly and know how to interact with foreign individuals with various cultural backgrounds, in order to handle cultural differences. Being actually unbiased, thoughtful, and collaborative is a method to establish connections in the work environment, boost innovation, and creativity, as well as increase the employees' productivity.

With that being said, our main investigation research problem is:
"What are the main intercultural obstacles facing a cross-cultural workplace?"

And that will lead us to make the following hypothesis:
• Hypothesis 1: Intercultural differences in time between foreign employees and managers are one of the main intercultural obstacles.
• Hypothesis 2: Intercultural differences in gender equality are one of the main intercultural obstacles.
• Hypothesis 3: Intercultural differences in customs and traditions between foreign employees and managers are one of the main intercultural obstacles.

The aim of this research study is to contribute to the existing field of intercultural management by examining and identifying the primary intercultural obstacles at a cross cultural work environment, triggered by numerous cultural variations that happen in between the managers own culture and foreign workers cultures.

Selecting AIESEC Egypt which is an international non-governmental not-for-profit organization, was a well appropriate option taking into account that it offered to us a very useful network of other various enterprises; our research study reached in overall fifteen Egyptian enterprises which host overseas workers of various cultural backgrounds from all over the world, and as a result of the data access that we got, we were able to apply the mixed-method that merges the quantitative as well as qualitative methods as the methodology of this investigation.

2. Culture And Diversity

According to the research article entitled "Developing expatriates" cross-cultural sensitivity: cultures where your culture's OK" is really not OK" (Carl Rodrigues, 1997):

Culture comprises a whole set of social norms and responses that condition people's behavior; it is obtained and inculcated, a set of rules and behavior patterns that an individual learns but does not acquire at birth. It empowers individuals to make sense out of their world, and it is foreign as it were to those outside. On a very basic level, groups of people develop their own environment as an adjustment to the physical environment, and they pass down their customs, practices, and traditions from era to era

According to the research article entitled "Culture and international management: a review" (Victoria, 2002)

There are as many definitions. "Culture is the way of life of the group of people" (Foster, 1996, p131). To illustrate the concept more those are the functions of culture:

• Culture enables us to identify with – that is, include ourselves in the same category with –other people of similar background;

• Culture provides the knowledge and skill necessary. For meeting sustenance needs;

• Culture makes it possible to anticipate how others in our society are likely to respond to our actions;

• Culture gives us standards for distinguishing between what is considered right or wrong, beautiful and ugly, reasonable and unreasonable, tragic and humorous, safe and dangerous;

• Culture enables us to communicate with others through a language that we have learned and that we share in common.

Diversity includes all forms of differences among individuals, counting gender, age, ability, religious affiliation, personality, economic class, social status and sexual orientation.

According to Kim (2006, p71): "Diversity in the workplace is growing faster than we can address its concomitant issues. Constant changes in a firm's culture and in people's personal beliefs force the workplace to deal with the concept and issue of diversity".

D'Netto and Sohal (1999, p539) find prove that human resource management practices are used by organizations to manage workforce diversity. The "business case" argument is that a diverse workforce will improve the productivity of an organization. According to Zulu and Parumasur (2009, p752), employers gain by completely using the abilities and potential of all workers within the organization.

According to Ospina (2001, p2), changes within the composition of the workforce strengthen employment heterogeneity, which needs to be appropriately managed to help accomplish organizational goals. In reality, workforce diversity has ended up an imperative for accomplishing organizational competitiveness and effectiveness. In brief, cultural diversity has three dimensions as outlined in the table:

Table 1. Dimensions of cultural diversity.

Primary Dimensions		
• Race • Ethnicity • Gender • Age • Disabilility	• Religion • Culture • Sexual orientation • Thinking style • Geographic origin • Family status • Lifestyle • Economic status • Political orinetation • Work experience • Education • Language • Nationality	• Beliefs • Assumptions • Perceptions • Attitudes • Feelings • Values • Group norms

Source: Rijamampinina and, Carmichael, 2005 , p10

The impacts of cultural diversity in the workplace can be an arm with two edges. The first one has negative effects include dysfunctional conflicts, lost productivity, and difficulty to achieve harmony in group settings. The second one has positive effects include a strong knowledge base created by a variety of cultural experiences, an in-house resource of cultural trainers and informers, organizations may gain a competitive advantage in creativity, problem solving, and flexible adaptation to change.

For the most part, the effects of cultural diversity in the workplace depend upon how well they are being managed by the organizational managers or leaders. With proper strategic planning, top management can enhance the positive effects and mitigate the negative effects of cultural diversity in the workplace.

3. The Intercultural Differences

3.1. Cross Cultural Difference in Time

According to Hall, time is part of a silent language that gives meaning to individuals and their behaviors, but the "informal patterning of time is one of the most consistently overlooked aspects of culture" (Hall, 1959, p152). This paradox holds vital implications around our understanding of intercultural differences: Time is an essential cultural dimension that gives hints about the values and norms in a culture. Thus, understanding the way time is divided, scheduled, and handled gives valuable insights into a culture. Non-native understandings of temporal patterns can inform outsiders' interactions with a culture.

Nevertheless, these subtle differences are frequently overlooked or misunderstood,

as Hall explains. In management and organizations, Ancona (Ancona et al, 2011), demonstrate that time is surprisingly under-researched in organizational studies even though it is a common inquiry in other disciplines.

3.1.1. Time Focus (monochronic/polychronic)

Time is viewed differently in each culture referring to its traditions, beliefs, history etc. According to Hall and Hall (1990, p168), the two authors differentiate two types of time systems: monochronic and polychronic.

In cultures where monochronic time system is applied, time is used in a linear way where people perform one activity at a time according to a pre-set schedule. Furthermore, their focus is on information rather than individuals.

On the other hand, in cultures where polychronic time system is followed people focus on more than one task and depend less on detailed information because individuals take priority over schedules which are open to change.

3.1.2. Time orientation (Past, Present and Future)

Cultures obviously vary when it comes to their perception of time orientation. For instance, cultures concerned about the past are those that appreciate past traditions in their culture. Their plans are focused on whether they are in concordance with the history and traditions of the company.

While cultures concerned about the present are those interested in short-term gain. Future focused companies are those concerned about long-term benefits. An emphasis on cultures oriented towards the past is made by Hall and Hall (1990, p168), whereby countries such as the Far East, India and Iran stick to the past.

On the other hand, the urban United States culture is oriented towards the present and short-term future and the culture of Latin America is oriented to both the past and present. As a result, past oriented companies empower traditions and build on them long-term plans. While future oriented companies emphasize longer-term plans and results.

3.2. Cross- Cultural Differences in Gender Equality

Masculinity and Femininity is considered one of the cultural dimensions in Hofstede's framework, this dimension looks at the extent to which a culture supports a traditional view of masculine and feminine traits. For these purposes, masculinity refers to traits associated with assertiveness and femininity refers to traits associated with nurture (Hofstede, 2011, p20).

Taking the business side, gender is another big issue that business organizations are faced with nowadays. Being as one of the most important variables in the workplace, it has gained much attention in the research field, due to the increasing number of female workforces entering organizations (Umans, Collin, and Tagesson, 2008, p250).

At a cross-cultural workplace, the gender differences are produced by culture determining what type of tasks is performed by men and women (Schalkwyk, 2000, p29).

Furthermore, the increase of employees' gender diversity entering the cross-cultural workplace make the communication within intercultural working teams more complex, because of the different mind sets and behavior habits between male and

female (Kühlmann and Heinz, 2017, p63).

Still in some cultures, there is a difference between men and women regarding their authority and competencies. Sometimes, this might lead to misunderstandings and even to conflicts. Especially, if the supervisor is a woman, therefore the Workplace gender equality is achieved when people are able to access and enjoy the same rewards, resources and opportunities regardless of gender itself.

3.3.   Cross-Cultural differences in customs and traditions

Another three main cross-cultural differences that were found important are summarized in the below table:

Table 2. Customs and traditions

Cross-Cultural differences regarding	Explanation	How to handle this
Food	Because of religion or individual conviction. People may have different eating habits. They may reject to consume specific food	You should respect your employees' religion customs. Consider individual needs e.g., at social events and if applicable in your staff restaurant.
Dressing	A dress code is common in many professions. However, the interpretation can be different between cultures. In some cultures, suit and tie are expected.	If the appearance of an employee does not correspond to your organization's regular dress code. You should give him her some kind advice.
Religion	Religion is very important in some cultures and has a great impact at the workplace (e.g., time for prayer). In most western countries. Religion belongs to private life.	Discuss with your employee, if he/she has any specific needs regarding his or her religion. Try to find a compromise/solution that works for you and the employee.

Source: Kühlmann and Heinz, 2017, p62-63

4. Context and Methodology

Regarding the experimental component of our investigation, we have indeed chosen 2 principal research methods which are:

1. Quantitative research

2. Qualitative research

The common distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is that quantitative methods build on numbers, dealing with "how much of a kind", providing often a "macro" view involving large samples, Nevertheless the qualitative methods deal with "what kind" questions, involving the views of participant, it gathers data from small samples of people providing a "micro" view (Strand, 2017).

As a result, we see in the light of our theme of study, that a mixed-method would be more effective, which will combine both (the quantitative and qualitative research

methods), for the reason that experiences in cross-cultural exchanges can be obtained through both questionnaires and interviews. There are several reasons for combining the two methods:

On the first place, the main reason was that a mixed-method could help meet the need for in-depth explanations and information about the intercultural obstacles. The combination of the two could complete each other, in that the questionnaire gathered information through pre-coded answers from the employees' side, and the interviews gathered the more detailed explanations from the manager's side.

On the second place, since our study is built on the comparison between the two major categories ("managers" and "employees") perceptions of intercultural obstacles at the workplace, the mixed-method is the proper one to our study in terms of the number of samples of the two categories, since it will be as a fact that employees are more numbered then managers, which will lead us to use the quantitative method (questionnaire) for being able to control the information that will be provided by the employees, on the other hand the qualitative (interview guide) will be used on the managers with less effective comparing to employees, for extracting as much as possible information.

On the third place, it was related to the concern that the questionnaire would not be sufficient by its own due to the fact that it is distributed exclusively to the employees with a different cultural background, the same as the interview guide was limited to managers, therefore both methods complete each other.

Additionally, the reason for choosing a questionnaire was also because previous cultural studies have relied upon quantitative methods. "Most studies comparing cultures…use data collected from individuals within cultures, such as responses on questionnaires" (Hofstede, 2001, p15). As the limitation of informants would be a weakness in the quantitative method, qualitative methods were also used. "Strengths of one method offset weaknesses in other methods" (Blaikie, 2010, P219). In sum, the mixed-method would "help answer research questions that cannot be answered by one method alone" (John, 2007, p63).

Thus, mixing quantitative and qualitative methods, by using the triangulation Design: Convergence Model (John, 2007) is the most adequate mixed method type that enables us to compare and contrast properly the quantitative findings with the qualitative results.

Fig.1. The Convergence Model
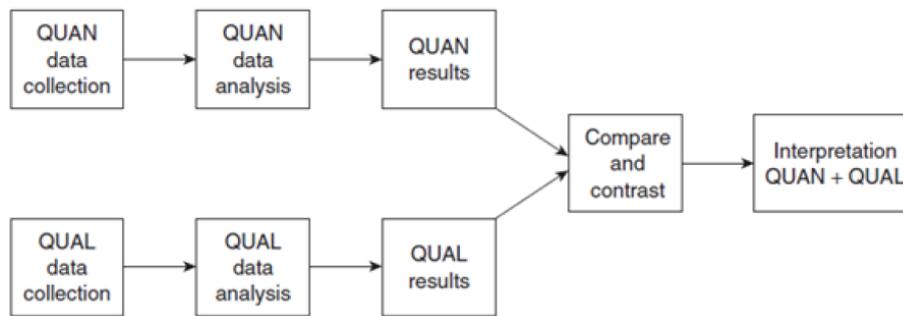
Source: John, 2007, p63

5. Data Collection Methods

5.1.   Questionnaire and Survey Process

The online questionnaire is semi structured, a blend of pre-coded response questions and open response questions (Asbjørn, et al, 2016, p106) and that is for the reason that our investigation is indeed an exploratory one. As the main focus of the questionnaire, found on the construction of the theoretical framework as well as the suggested hypotheses, is to sign out the various intercultural obstacles from the employees' perspective, nearly all of the questions were pre-coded.

The survey was conducted via Google forms, and a link which was handed out to respondents via social media (Facebook, WhatsApp) contacts which we managed to accumulate in the course of our internship time period with AIESEC Egypt from the different whole 15 enterprises.

The different axes of the questionnaire are as the following:

-Axis 1: Identification of the respondents' profile.

-Axis 2: Picking out more comprehensive information which can be strongly related to the intercultural variations which, in our investigation, consist of three categories.

1. Time

2. Gender equity

3. Customs and traditions

5.2.   Interview-guide and interview process

The Interview Guide which is utilized in this investigation search is a structured interview type. As a result, the interviews were completely planned, all questions as well as themes were earlier prepared. The interviewer exclusively takes into account the questions which are presented in the questionnaire.

Our research investigation has taken this same interview type so it can go for narrowed information and experiences that we are exploring. It will empower us to collect the right information which we are specifically searching.

Our aim from conducting these interviews was to collect and get information as well as specific experiences regarding cultural variations that are present at the workplace from the managers' perspective.

The interview guide is ordered into 3 principal axes; each axis gives us detailed and

narrowed information linked to cultural variations; those axes are as the following:

-Axis 1: Cultural differences in time.

-Axis 2: Gender equality.

-Axis 3: Cultural differences in customs and tradition

5.3. Sampling and Data Collection

We have chosen in our investigation research a non-probabilistic as well as a reasoned choice method, as a result, the aimed population regarding the questionnaire, is made up of multinational people from various background fields that includes Engineering, Business, and Photography) who decided to participate for AIESEC Egypt projects, the work period begins from forty-five days till one year and half as this is based on the contract signed with the welcoming enterprise, when it comes to our internship timeline that was lasted indeed forty-five days, seventy persons actually were attended at fifteen enterprises in various occupations that includes engineering, solar system, digital marketing, clothes production, and photography), we handed out the questionnaire to them without any exception, getting sixty answers which actually constitute 86% of our population.

However, we made sure that the questionnaire was anonymous, in other words, the survey profiles cannot be identified or related to any informant or enterprise, whereas, each of the respondents, who are taken as foreign employees in our investigation, came from the exact total of the fifteen enterprises.

When it comes to our interview guide, the population is constituted as well of fifteen enterprises' general managers, it was a fact that the interview guide was not embraced by all the general managers; as some perceived the information we asked confidential. As a result, four interview guides were obtained that will help us certainly to proceed the investigation.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have made a decision to start conducting the questionnaire in the first place, whose information was gathered as well as treated into charts using the Google forms and tables via Microsoft excel, afterward the interview guide was made via phone calls.

Since the investigation is found on identifying the principal obstacles of a cross-cultural workplace, when it comes to the questionnaire results, the Indian and the Brazilian nationalities are in fact the most 2 dominants ones in our targeted population, however, we should note that our main investigation is originally about shared obstacles regardless of nationalities.

In our investigation, when it comes to gender, the participation of both sexes is equal, whereas, the age of the majority of respondents is between 20 and 25 years (85%), the small portion goes to people between 25 and 30 years (15%). Both of them formulates a youth blend who aims to jump-start their careers by participating in a program of a duration that sets between 12 up to 78 weeks.

Last but not least, respondents don't speak, write or even read Arabic. Yet their level in English is between upper intermediate and advanced. Every question will be treated and analyzed separately in the next part.

**Fig.2.** The cultural differences leading to a misunderstanding
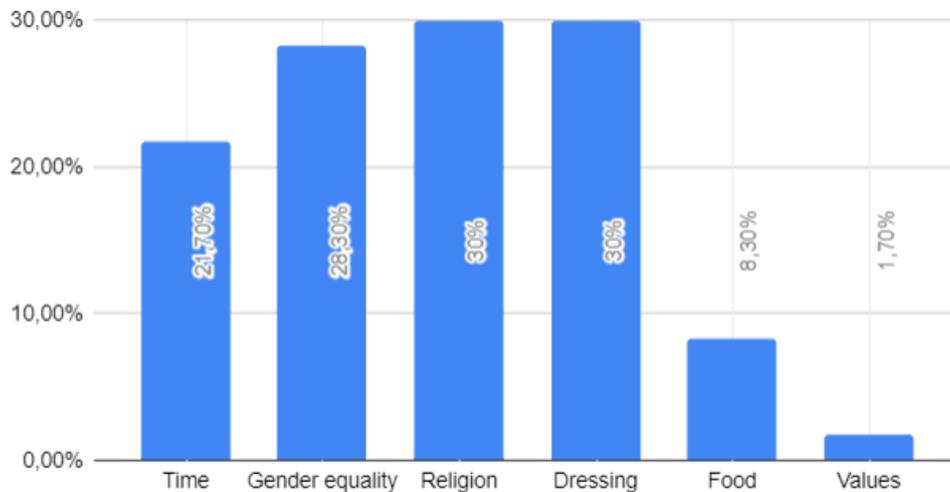
According to the above graph, we can observe that on the very first place Religion and dressing presents each 30% followed by Gender equality which constitutes 28.3%, then time represent a considerable portion which is 21.7%, noting that food then values occupy the last place, which they represent respectively 8.3% and 1.7%.

**Fig.3.** The rate of being on time for work
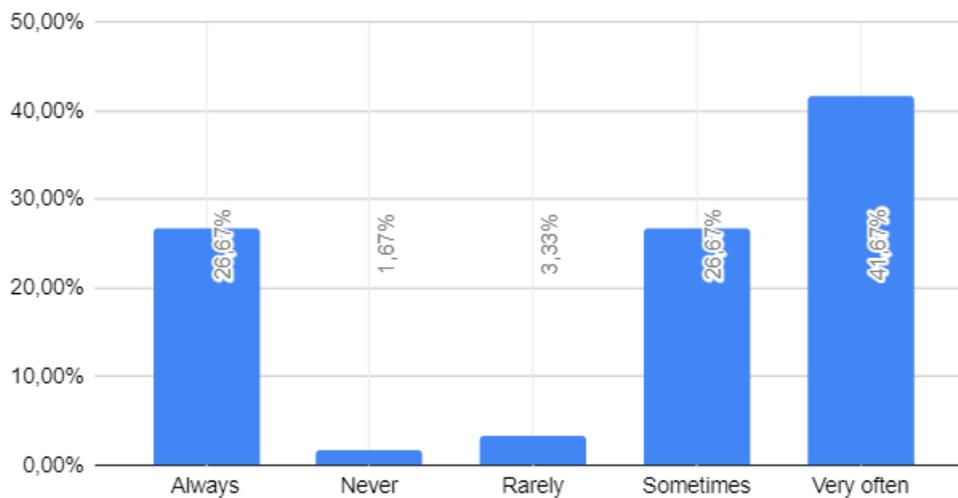
According to the graph above, we can see that the majority of the population which represents 41,67% of the whole, has chosen the frequency "very often", which means that the majority takes time seriously, on the second place, the frequencies "sometimes" and "always" represent the exact same portion of the total population, that is 26,67%, whereas, respectively 3,33% and 1,67% goes for "Rarely" and "Never".

**Fig.4.** The rate of leaving the office earlier than the appointed time
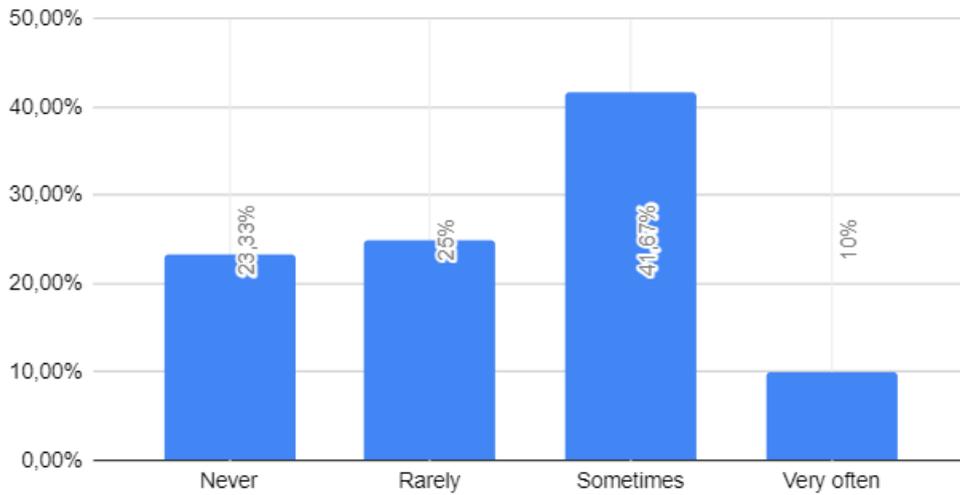
The above graph shows that a big portion of employees (41,66%) leave their office earlier than the appointed time, one-quarter of them do that rarely. One-tenth among the sample do that very often, and 14% never do it.

Fig.5. The way of doing the tasks
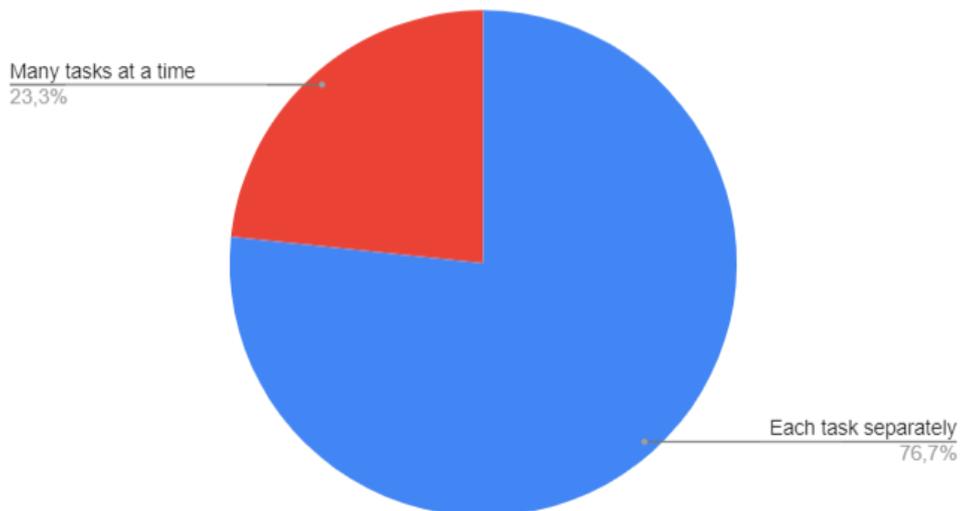
The results of the graph show that, a huge part of the employees (76,7 %) prefer doing each task separately, the rest of them (23,3 %) prefer doing several tasks at a time.

Fig.6. Gender discrimination at the workplace
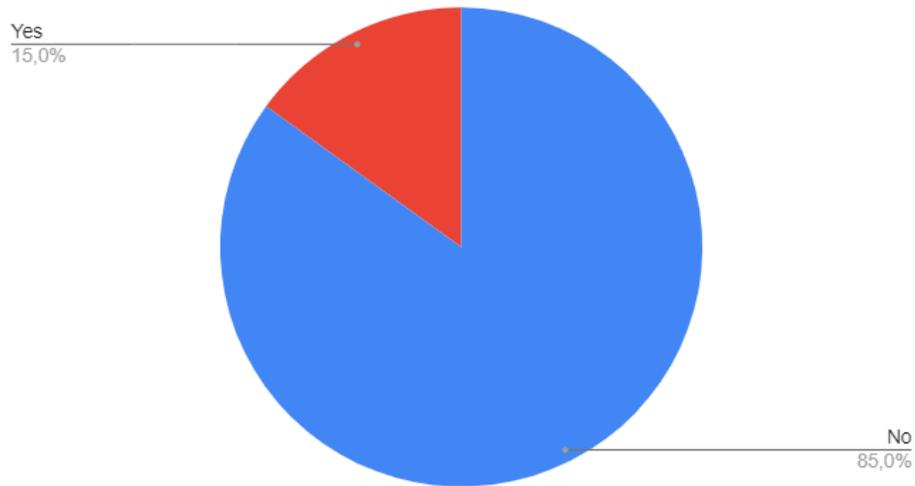
When it comes to the issue related to the gender discrimination, the above graph demonstrates that the majority of all workers (85%) agreed that there is no discrimination related to gender, however, 15% of the population which can be considered a decent number, see that there is indeed a discrimination based on gender in the workplace.

Fig.7. Gender equality at the work place
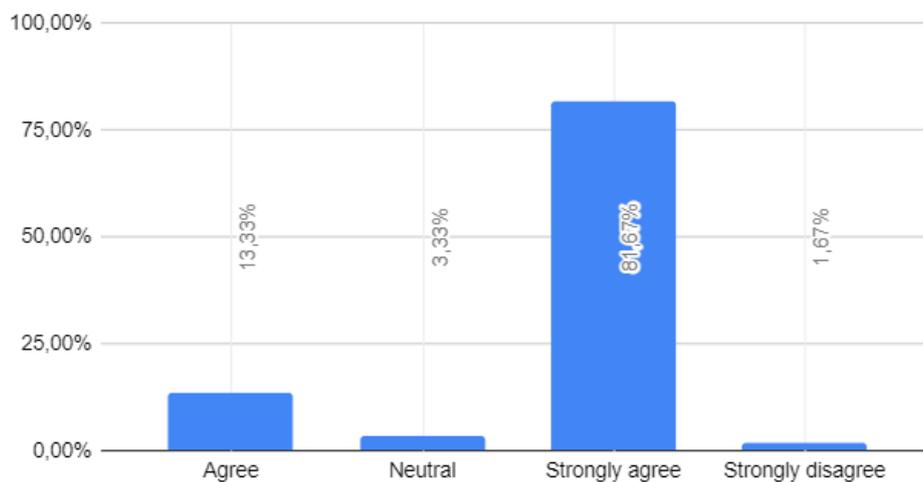
In what concerns gender equality, the above graph shows that almost all the employees (81,66 %) strongly agreed upon on the necessity to be valued and favored equally, besides that 13,33 % do agree on the matter. We can conclude that the majority chose gender equality at the workplace.

6.1.   Synthesis of Interview Guide
6.1.1. Time

According to answers of question "Do you give extra time for your foreign employees to finish their tasks? And why?", three of our managers agreed on giving extra time for employees to finish their tasks, yet one of them didn't agree with the others saying "I give the task and ask my employee about the time needed to finish it, why does he need extra time". Moving forward to the question "How do you prefer assigning tasks to your employees? And why?" with its two proposed answers to choose from: "Giving many tasks at once", "Giving each task separately". all of our interviewed

mangers are applying the monochronic time system, "one task is the best method to follow the work step by step," said a manager. "Because stressing them with many tasks at once will never achieve positive output, i focus on quality not quantity," said another.

6.1.2. Gender Quality

Concerning gender equality question "Do you think that a woman would be able to fill a top position at your workplace? (Please justify)", the first manager said about having a woman in a top position "yes I believe in them so much they are very smart and creative". "It depends on experience" said another one and continued by "if a woman is good I don't mind having her in a top position", and the two others agreed on having an equal chance between men and women and it's up to them to show their abilities. To sum up, from the mangers perspective there is no gender discrimination.

6.1.3. Customs and Traditions

Referring to the question "Can you describe any cultural differences concerning: Religion, Food, Dressing". According to our managers, most of the employees don't practice their religion at the workplace. For the dress code one said "it's impossible to ask a woman to put on a veil or change the way of her dressing" and carried on by explaining that sometimes it's not even related to the workplace but it's about the customers, it seems that managers are suffering from dressing. concerning food, "Indians use their hands to eat and they don't eat beef" said a manager, in brief, from the perspective of the managers it seems that there is no issue concerning religion and food, but some kinds of dress sometimes is a challenging matter.

6.2. General Synthesis

6.2.1. Time

For the perception of time, the majority of foreign employees and manager goes with a monochromic time system, both sides prefer perform one activity at a time, the managers argue that it is a good way to have an effective results, and the employees feel comfortable having a linear way in order to put their complete focus on performing the task. In the other hand the minority that prefers the polychronic time system might face some sameness.

6.2.2. Gender Equality

When it comes to gender equality, almost a total opposite perspectives, the managers (the four of them are men) are claiming that there is no gender discrimination and they are willing to give equal chances regardless of the gender, in the other hand, a decent number of foreign employees are complaining about the subject at the workplace, yet almost every employee is appealing for a gender equality.

6.2.3. Customs and Traditions

For religion, the managers claim that the foreign employees don't practice their religion at the workplace, the managers" observation is that religion is not an issue. In contrast, foreign employees see it as a problem for not being able to practice their religion at the workplace and it's somehow their right if it wouldn't impose an undue hardship as mentioned in the analysis of the qualitative part. Therefore, employees appeal to solve the issue to avoid any kind of misunderstandings. For the dress code, the majority of managers believe that it's not a matter in question at the workplace;

nevertheless, some of them are more concerned that the dress code could be sometimes a trouble in relation to the perception of customers. In the other hand, the foreign employees also see it as a difficulty. Concerning the food, as stated in our analysis, both the employees and the mangers faced a slight cultural difference that does not probably lead to misunderstanding.

7. CONCLUSION

The investigation search that we made actually aimed to produce the operationalization of the theoretical and practical knowledge to give a decent response to our problematic "What are the main intercultural obstacles that are facing a cross-cultural workplace?"

The triangulation mixed method which is utilized in this investigation study is constituted of the questionnaire as well the interview guide actually qualified our study to indeed confirm or refute the presented research hypotheses, in this regard we have got the following results:

Hypothesis 1: Intercultural differences in the perception of time between foreign employees and managers are one of the main intercultural obstacles.

The results of our research refuted this hypothesis; this deduction was made based on the same perception of time that has been adapted by the majority of both foreign employees and managers, both sides favor to assign and perform one activity or task at a time separately (monochromic time system), therefore taking into account the different nationalities existed in our sample, the intercultural differences concerning the time are more or less existed.

Bearing in mind that followers of polychronic time system do exist in our sample, posing an intercultural challenge for managers, hence if it is not adapted and considered, this could generate a main intercultural challenge in the future.

Hypothesis 2: Intercultural differences in gender equality between foreign employees and managers are one of the main intercultural obstacles.

Our findings in our research study have enabled us to confirm this hypothesis, for the reason of the contradictory perspectives of both managers and employee, noting from the managers' standpoint that there is total gender equality at the workplace for giving access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, opposing foreign employees' opinion that has been ranked the third intercultural main challenge in our quantitative findings.

Hypothesis 3: Intercultural differences in customs and traditions between foreign employees and managers are one of the main intercultural obstacles.

Our findings in our research study have enabled us to confirm this hypothesis. For religion, opposed views has been noted from both managers and foreign employees' sides, religion hasn't been practiced at the workplace from the managers' opinions, thus manager held in mind the idea of not having an intercultural differences in religion, which is totally the inverse case with foreign employees' opinions in their answers of the questionnaire, ranking religion the second main intercultural challenge in parallel with dressing.

For dressing, after analyzing the questionnaire results, it was clear that the majority of foreign employees have manifested that dressing is an intercultural challenge, opposing the managers' majority point of views claiming in the interview guide that dressing is not a real issue; nevertheless, it could be sometimes a handicap relating to the perception of company customers.

Still, it is considered a main intercultural challenge for being ranked the second issue from foreign employees view in parallel to religion.

For food, referring to our research study findings both managers and foreign employees have not manifested significant concerns about it, as a result food has not been considered as a real intercultural challenge for the company despite the presence of small intercultural differences in it.

However, we are unable to generalize these results, given the limitations of our research due mainly to the subjectivity of the qualitative study and the confidentiality of the data within the host companies besides the limited number of nationalities that we have reached in this study.

While doing the research we found that it is necessary to highlight some humble suggestions as follow:

- Develop onboard, integration, and engaging programs for new foreign employees.
- Create clear and flexible norms taking into consideration the perspective of every employee and try always to improve them and explain why it has to be that way.
- Best solution to solve a conflict is to avoid it, if not try to solve it immediately to ensure that a small conflict doesn't turn into something that's impossible to manage.
- Try to build personal bonds between the employees in order to ease potential disagreements or conflict.

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