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The Role of Key Communication Competences in Corporate Cooperation

Abstract: Currently, much attention is paid to key competences, with particular emphasis on the role and competences of humans. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to overview the competence definitions and key competences related thereto. Moreover the paper will focus on the role of communication competences along with up to date communication technology. The typologies of competence currently appearing in Polish and international literature will also be presented. The role of cultural dimensions in the formation of relationships with international partners will be highlighted as well. The final element will include the stress put on the role of communication as one of the key competences influencing corporate cooperation and indicating the innovative forms of communication between business partners.

Keywords: business cooperation; communication; communication models; competence; innovative communication tools

Introduction

Effective cooperation is determined by a number of variables. Currently, competences are more and more frequently mentioned in the literature as one of the essential factors thereof (Lunenburg, 2010; Antos, 2010; Eisenberg, 2010). Much attention is paid to key competences, particularly emphasising the role and competences of humans. Communication is also indicated as the core partly responsible for creating cooperation. Furthermore, the position of innovative technological solutions supporting communication in business partner cooperation is also highlighted. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to overview the competence definitions and key competences related thereto (Antos, 2010). The typologies of competence currently appearing in Polish and international literature will also be presented (Keyton, 2011). The role of cultural dimensions in the

formation of relationships with international partners will be highlighted also (Cheney, 2011). The final element will include the stress put on the role of communication as one of the key competences influencing corporate cooperation and indicating the innovative forms of communication between business partners (Pauley, 2010).

COMPETENCES WITH PARTICULAR REGARD TO KEY COMPETENCES IN THE CONTEXT OF BUSINESS COOPERATION

The term "competence" is derived from the Latin *competentia* and has the original meaning of "holding knowledge enabling an entity to evaluate and express one's own opinion based on the knowledge and experience held" (Furmanek, 1997).

According to Jenkins (2007), "competence means the ability and readiness to perform tasks on a determined level". Fontana (1992), however, defines competence as "a studied ability to perform tasks correctly", and defines it as a skill necessary for handling problems.

The Spencers' approach is correlated to the above definition, as they understand competence as knowledge, skills, values and standards, motives, ethics of work, enthusiasm and their own image (Spencer and Spencer, 1993).

Thierry (1994), Sauret (1994) and Monod (1994) add that competences represent the inner human potential disclosed when translated into the external effects thereof, for example while performing one's professional duties. Thus, competences may be considered while being disclosed. Therefore, as in the case of knowledge, some concealed and revealed competences can be distinguished, however, the revealed ones only appear to be valuable. In the opinion of Thierry (1994), Sauret (1994) and Monod (1994) competences consist of knowledge, skills, values, motives and attitudes.

Baugier (1993) and Vuillod (1993) emphasise that competences guarantee the competitive advantage to a business and, in consequence, economic success. From their point of view, competences include knowledge, skills and experience.

Kossowska (2002) and Sołtysińska (2002) acknowledge that competences constitute the aggregate of knowledge acquired in a specific field plus skills and attitudes. The author of this paper shares competence definitions presented by Kossowska (2002) and Sołtysińska (2002), as well as that of the Spencers' (1993). This results from the fact that in her opinion their definitions are fairly comprehensive at the same time referring to the most important aspects from an individual point of view, which translates into business functioning. In her opinion, it is difficult to discuss an organization's competences, omitting staff competences. The latter constitute the foundations of an organisation.

Particular attention should be paid at this point to the key competence concepts in the theory of management. According to Prahalad (1999) and Hamel (1999), key competences represent collective knowledge and an instrument of learning in the organization, revealed in the ability to provide clients with additional benefits. They consists of resources and skills. Resources mean assets, both tangible and intangible, which, for key competence purposes, are evaluated in relation to the business targets and strategies, competitors and the applicable economic-financial standards. Abilities are composed of specific skills, relationships, organisational knowledge and reputation. They are invisible and intangible. Key competences enable the accumulation of knowledge

and the channelling of it in the direction enabling the business to succeed (Stankiewicz, 2002; Lunenburg, 2010; Antos, 2010; Eisenberg, 2010).

According to Filipowicz (2014), entrepreneurship, innovativeness, openness to the client's demands and teamwork are frequently indicated as key competences. All the key competences are sourced with individual organizational entities – the employees.

Penc-Pietrzak (2013) further divides key competences into universal and specific ones. However, due to the fact that key competences in a business should be unique and specific, competences treated as being specific and implemented in universal areas of the organisation operations.

The role of communicating in creating relationships with cooperation partners

In the opinion of Anderson (1964), Lewis (1964) and Murray (1964) communicating is a process of enabling the sender to create meaning for an individual listener or a group of listeners thanks to the application of visual or audible symbols. It is also worth to mention the definition of the term quoted by Antoszewski and Herbut (1995) in which social communication is understood as the process of generation, transformation and transmission of information between individuals, groups and social organisations. The communication assumption is the formation of attitudes and transfer of knowledge, consistent with the values followed by the entities entering the information exchange relationship (Antoszewski and Herbut, 1995). The comprehensive definition of the term "communication" is presented by Rogala (2013), acknowledging that communication is a complex and dynamic process when the sender creates a message to the recipient in a verbal, non-verbal or symbolic form. The assumption of such an action is to evoke a response in the information recipient. Szałkowski (2005) recognises that communicating is a key social competence thanks to which an individual efficiently starts and maintains interpersonal relationships. Communication is the process of penetrating human actions. It focuses on maintaining the contact with the other party and encoding/decoding the information exchange between the individuals.

In the communication process a very significant role, as emphasised in the literature, is the social capital, its core, in the case of organisation, being the personnel, constituting a set of standards and values regulating the mutual cooperation of the individuals. It usually guarantees the synergy effect achieved thanks to the positive relationship in the team (Szałkowski, 2005). It is worth emphasising that a substantial effect on creating the said synergy is made by the competences discussed above, with a considerable role played by communication.

An unusually important role is also played by the international communication that is based on improving the knowledge and awareness of cultural differences, respecting their dimensions and confronting local with foreign values (Matsumoto, 2007). In the opinion of Czerepaniak-Walczak (1994), international communication requires a set of competences that affect the effectiveness of information exchange between international business partners. She includes the openness to information about others, the ability and skills at sustaining a dialogue, the ability to cohabit and solve problems (conflicts), as well as mutual cultural enhancement. Laszuk confirmed this statement in his research as well (Laszuk, 2016). Bennett (1986) also mentions competences particularly important in international communication between the partners. He indicates

the ability to accept diversity, the ability to adapt to cultural differences with particular respect to intercultural thinking. Then he mentions the ability to integrate diversities displayed by making a correct intercultural analysis and a diagnosis of the behaviours of partners originating from different cultural circles.

At this point it is worthwhile to indicate the selected communication models encountered in the literature. The four most significant ones, according to the author of this paper, have been presented in the table below.

Tab. 1. Communication models

Communication model	Characteristics
Information transfer	Unilateral process of information encoding by the sender and decoding by the recipient.
Settling the meaning	Process accentuating the meaning of the message sender and recipient, its purpose being the mutual understanding. Communication has a communitarian dimension, focusing on social relationships considering the cultural dimension.
Persuasion	The model focuses on elaborating the consensus between the parties based on the mutual convincing and arguing. Convincing creates common understanding of meanings.
Creating communities	A model constituting an instrument of building communities and social capital.

Source: Morreale, Spitzberg, Barge (2007)

Disregarding the model, communications are always characterised with the features that may include the social context and nature, purposefulness, awareness of the process, interaction, dynamics, complexity, continuity, creativity, irreversibility and the symbolism thereof (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2007). They all play an important role in the case of creating positive relationships between cooperating partners, either domestic or international.

At this point we should point out the barriers related to communication, the overcoming of which should influence the improvement of cooperation between the partners. Basically, in the reference literature one may find five major varieties of barriers: interpersonal barriers related to the persons of the sender and recipient, barriers resulting from the lack of awareness and the ability to communicate, the barriers concerning the information quality, barriers related to the physical and social environment and the barriers of organizational nature (Sobkowiak, 2005).

It is worthwhile indicating that the barriers often converge with general ones identified on the commencement of cooperation. Thus, we may presume that one of the key competences facilitating cooperation is the ability to communicate effectively.

The examples of specific barriers related to the sender and recipient may be the reluctance to communicate, avoiding openness, earlier negative experiences, prejudices, erroneous views, the lack of assertiveness, suspending information, excessive emotionality, the lack of trust and reliability and hasty judgments. The barriers resulting from the lack of awareness and communication skills should also include unskilful listening, improper message dynamics, limited control of the information contents and language differences. An example of barriers related to the information quality may in turn lead to the transmission of irrelevant messages, delays in message transfer, divergences, ambiguities, information overload and incongruity of the message with the recipient. Communication noises, imposing the message form or excessive or insufficient time

constitute barriers generated by the physical and social environment. The last group are organisational barriers that may include, without limitation, the carrying out of actions impeding communication, discouragement and the lack of motivation, excessive formalism, organisation culture impeding openness and avoiding the expression of opinions, including negative ones (Sobkowiak, 2005).

So the specific barriers, typical to international communication, are worth indicating. The most common barriers include: restrictions related to language differences and the misinterpretation of non-verbal signals (Lunenburg, 2010). A subtle discrimination shown in expressing jokes, comments of a negative shade or the tendency to dominate by one of the groups representing a specific culture or the unawareness or negation of cultural difference occurrence may be included here (Matsumoto, 2007). Moreover, the restrictions may include stereotypical thinking, prejudices and the tendency to proclaim evaluating judgments. The restrictions also include the creation of a deformed image of one's own culture or the occurrence of cultural ethnocentrism. The problems with intercultural communication, resulting from the above-mentioned barriers, may become the source of conflict between the partners (Marx, 2000). Therefore, much attention must be paid to the formation of correct international communication. The potential barriers related thereto must also be diagnosed as neglecting in this aspect may at least cause disorientation or astonishment. In the case of a more pessimistic scenario, it may lead to the suspension or even the termination of the cooperation. Therefore, the monitoring of the course of communication between the parties and continuing intercultural education, e.g. in the form of training courses, are of the utmost importance (Cheney, 2011).

It should be emphasised that appropriate competences may influence communication improvement, especially between international cooperation partners. The most significant competences, from the author's point of view, will be the active listening ability, the skill of constructing clear messages, the ability to adapt information to the recipient or assertiveness. The sensitivity to non-verbal language would also be a valuable competence in the case of communicating with international partners (Keyton, 2011).

In the case of effective communication, the stages taking place prior to the very communication start are essential. Prior to starting cooperation a visit to the partner is recommended in order to get to know them better, identify the actual field of their activity, evaluate the potential and meet the personnel. The appropriate preliminary meeting should influence the restriction of risks related to further cooperation. This will enable the determination of whether the problem the partners plan to work upon is viable, or it whether it can be classed in the declarative sphere. The meeting should also restrict the risk of unethical action on the part of the potential partner, for example the collection of information by such a partner, that might be negatively used against the other party or enable them an easier cooperation start with another partner. Moreover, it should limit the risk of exclusive market surveillance by the potential partner without the intention to start the actual cooperation (Pauley, 2010).

At the cooperation start, it is significant to involve the partner into creating a project concept its assumptions, analysis of the resources available and foreseeing the potential risks. Thanks to such a procedure, communication between the parties is formed positively; the parties are used to a permanent transfer of information, experiences and considerations, they also have a sense of greater commitment including greater cooperation and a sense of balance of strengths and efforts. Another significant

element related to the method of starting cooperation is the acquisition of knowledge concerning the substantial experience of the partners and determination of the mutual expectations of the cooperation partners and principles. The verification of the cultural and economic environment of the partners is of equal importance. The definition of the communication principles, the information and knowledge transfer model, setting the document circulation principles or tools used in the said process appear to be the key aspects here. To provide effective communication, cooperation partners must keep in permanent touch. The very communication must be simple, clear, concise, fast and fluent (Jamrozik, 2013).

Innovative communication tools used in the cooperation of international entities

At this point we should proceed to the communication tools used by businesses. They are very often used in the case of cooperation. According to the typology suggested by Olsztyńska (2002), the author of this paper proposed a classification of tools divided into traditional and modern ones. In the category of modern tools, the author places those related to state of the art technologies. They have been presented in the table below.

Tab. 2. Communication tools

Traditional communication tools	Modern communication tools with the use of electronic media
Direct conversation	E-mail
Bulletins	Discussion forum
Company newspapers	Helplines
Memorandums	Intranet
Manuals	Community portals (social media)
Reports	Wiki
Meetings	Newsletter
Suggestion boxes	Blog
Surveying opinions and attitudes	On-line comments
Independent coordinators	Chat
Integration meetings	
Courses, training	
Study visits	
Interdisciplinary teams	

Source: Olsztyńska (2002), Raport GFMP (2010)

It is worth to scrutinise selected modern communication tools and the operation of their synthetic characteristics. Intranet is an internal electronic portal to be used by recipients specified by the sender only. Intranet includes electronic message boards, chats, blogs, multi-media presentations and video or audio materials. It enables fast data upgrading, taking place almost in real time. It also provides freedom in the scope of topic or information volume.

Blog is also a tool worth closer description. It enables the management of knowledge, it allows for interactivity. It is time-consuming and requires substantial time volumes devoted by the recipient and sender, however it sometimes is particularly effective

in the case of consulting current topics, explaining complicated issues and implementing processes (Bolek, 2012).

Time constitutes a kind of conversation conducted with the use of Internet between two or more users of computers, based on the alternate transmission of text messages (www.old.stat.gov.pl).

Wiki is in turn a specific website (Web 2.0), that may be browsed and created or edited thanks to an Internet browser. It enables the commitment of numerous people into creating one site (www.informatyka.wroc.pl).

Newsletter is a newspaper sent by e-mail. The specific character of a newsletter is the fact that it often contains synthetic information with reference to the message in its full form (Frankowski, 2009).

A discussion forum is a discussion group transformed into a virtual structure, enabling the exchange of information and views (www.slownik.intensys.pl).

A community portal is a web service which exists on the basis of the community surrounding it (www.slownik.intensys.pl).

The most popular community media in Poland include at present: Facebook, NK, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+, GoldenLine and Profeo. The data suggest that 86% Polish businesses attempt to communicate with domestic and international partners using Facebook (www.interaktywnie.com). Although this was a system originally oriented on an individual client, at present it also plays a significant role with relation to corporate clients, therefore it is an excellent medium. It enables the solicitation of a wide range of partners, supports interactions with the users and provides easy access to the launch of statistics and "Likes" (Gitomer, 2012). YouTube on its part provides businesses with the possibility of launching virus or shock marketing thanks to the upload of videos in the context of relationships with the cooperating partners (Żukowska and Sroczyński, 2013). More and more frequently the cooperation partners select the development of a mobile application. Although its creation is related to costs, that are usually higher than the cost of building a mobile, responsive web site, the mobile application, however has greater opportunities and is perceived by the users as a more attractive, modern medium (Żukowska and Sroczyński, 2014).

Furthermore, analysing the data acquired from the report about communication in Poland, it is noticeable that the modern tools analysed play an important role also in the communication between the cooperating partners. The most popular ones are discussion forums (65% respondents), comments (63%) and chat (50%). Next the community portals (27%), Wiki (27%), blogs (20%), and newsletter (15%) appear. Intranet and e-mail were not subjected to such surveys (GFMP Management Consultants). Intranet was treated according to the definition suggested above, so the elements composing the tool were analysed. However, in the context of e-mails, according to the *ex-ante* assumption, the result would be that this is the most popular form in communication between the parties, so there is no need to take it into the consideration.

Modern tools are therefore often used by the cooperating partners. They remain even more effective in the case of long geographical distances. Their use enables the levelling of such restriction at the same time enabling significant cost reductions. Modern tools also represent important support in the case of time differences, but also some cultural differences. Therefore, they represent a correct solution between the culturally distant partners. So we may acknowledge that forums play a great role in the cooperation, just like the chats on Skype or the use of community portals.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the author made a reference overview of the term "competences" and the key competences closely correlated with them based on Polish and foreign literature review. She drew attention to the immensely important role of employee competences, emphasised in the literature, as significant in the functioning of businesses and to the cooperation of business partners. Moreover, she highlighted the role of communication as one of the key competences that influences the cooperation between the entities. She also presented innovative technological solutions, supporting communication between domestic and international partners.

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