

**BS ritgerð**  
**Í markaðsfræði og alþjóðaviðskiptum**

**The Importance of Intercultural Competence**

Viktorija Ólafsson



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Viðskiptafræðideild Háskóla Íslands**  
**Leiðbeinandi: Þóra Christiansen**  
**Júní 2009**

**BS ritgerð**  
**Í markaðsfræði og alþjóðaviðskiptum**

**The Importance of Intercultural Competence**

Viktorija Ólafsson



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Viðskiptafræðideild Háskóla Íslands**  
**Leiðbeinandi: Þóra Christiansen**  
**Júní 2009**



## **Abstract**

The object of this thesis is to expound the significance of intercultural competence, to spell out problems stemming from a lack thereof and to cover the possible ways of dealing with them. To be interculturally competent, an expatriate needs to have specific traits of character. It is also vital to be aware of the problems that are likely to come up in an intercultural environment. The study was based on previous studies and research, including Hofstede's dimensions on culture shock, masculinity vs. femininity, power distance, avoidance of uncertainty and individualism vs. collectivism. Furthermore, the research included investigation of manifold cultural differences and intercultural efficiency. It was concluded that various problems may result from a lack of intercultural competence. For the purpose of getting an in-depth view of the most common problems and in pursuit of the best possible ways of dealing therewith, five former expatriates were interviewed on their previous overseas experience. The findings of the study are based on personal experiences of the interviewees and suggest future expatriates the best course of action to avoid strain and to cope with any unwelcome situations.

# Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	4
2	Literature review: Intercultural competence.....	5
2.1	What is intercultural competence?.....	5
2.1.1	Definition .....	5
2.1.2	General description.....	6
2.1.3	Required traits .....	7
2.1.4	My point of view .....	8
2.2	Problems resulting from the lack of intercultural competence .....	8
2.2.1	Cultural differences .....	9
2.2.1.1	Individual's perspective .....	9
2.2.1.2	Company's perspective .....	11
2.2.2	Intercultural effectiveness.....	12
2.2.3	Diversity in the workplace.....	14
2.2.3.1	Individual's perspective .....	14
2.2.3.2	Managing diversity .....	16
2.2.4	Cultural shock.....	17
3	Methodology .....	21
4	Findings – the results from the interviews.....	22
4.1	Adaptation problems.....	22
4.2	Problems of intercultural effectiveness.....	22
4.3	Cultural shock.....	24
4.4	Cultural differences.....	24
4.5	Diversity in the workplace.....	25
4.6	Suggestions for future expatriates.....	25
5	Discussion .....	28
	Bibliography.....	29
	Appendices.....	31
	Appendix 1 – questionnaire .....	32
	Appendix 2 - interviews.....	33

# **1 Introduction**

The world is becoming a much smaller place and efficient communication and intercultural competence require good knowledge about other cultures and their uniqueness. This thesis aims at discussing the concept of intercultural competence, the problems resulting from the lack of it, and the ways of dealing with them.

The theoretical part is based on previous studies and research. It concludes that expatriates without intercultural competence encounter various problems. This brings to the research question:

- What are the problems resulting from the lack of intercultural competence and what are the ways of dealing with them?

Five former expatriates were interviewed in order to obtain an in-depth view of their previous intercultural experience and the problems they had encountered while communicating with different cultures. Therefore, the research was based on personal experiences. It provides a qualitative analysis of the problem. The results of the study are based on suggestions of the interviewees about the opportunities for future expatriates and what is needed to overcome the problems arising because of the lack of intercultural competence.

A special acknowledgement is extended to my instructor, Þóra Christiansen, for her support and guidance.

## **2 Literature review: Intercultural competence**

### **2.1 What is intercultural competence?**

#### **2.1.1 Definition**

The concept of intercultural competence is becoming broadly used these days. Business globalization is gathering pace, people travel from one country to another either on short term or long term trips, and it is essential to be interculturally competent to make the best of the stay abroad. Only an interculturally competent person can be an effective member of a multicultural team, and be able to establish an interpersonal relationship with a foreign national via an exchange of both verbal and nonverbal levels of behavior (Matveev & Milter, 2004). Therefore, to be able to act appropriately it is important to understand what intercultural competence is.

There is no single definition of intercultural competence. There are still a lot of different opinions on what intercultural competence is and how it is understood. Various scholars offer different descriptions of intercultural competence. Usually it is described as an ability to adapt and work in a different cultural environment, to understand different cultures and their values. Michael Byram describes intercultural competence as ‘the ability to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to society – and to mediate, that is interpret each terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people’ (Byram, 2000, ¶ 9) This is true, but intercultural competence is not only about relationships between different cultures, it is also the ability to work with them, translate them and adapt.

Alvino E. Fantini says that intercultural competence is ‘the complex of abilities to perform effectively and appropriately with members of another language-culture background on their terms’ (Fantini, 2001, ¶ 10). Language, however, is not the only measure of intercultural competence. Some cultures can speak the same language, but their culture can be completely different. For example, English is the official language in both India and the United States of America, but customs, attitudes and values in those countries differ significantly. India’s culture is called a high-context culture while the culture of the United States of America is known as a low-context culture. In low-context communication, the meaning of the communication resides primarily in the explicitly coded part of the communication rather than in the surrounding context. On the other hand, high-context communication assumes a strong reliance on

contextual and social cues for meaning. High-context communication also tends to be more nonverbal and indirect, using complex overtures and concrete sensory stimuli to evoke physical, social, and interpersonal contexts that add meaning to the discourse (Thatcher, 2001). Therefore, language in general is not a good way of defining intercultural competence. Both low-context and high-context cultures have different language-speaking countries in their groups, but people from the same context cultures have less problems getting acquainted with each other, even though the language they speak differs.

Darla Deardorff defines intercultural competence as ‘knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs and behaviors; and revitalizing one’s self’ (Deardorff, 2008, ¶ 9). Collier and Thomas (1988, p.117) say that ‘intercultural competence is not a set list of skills that can guarantee success and positive outcomes. Intercultural competence is a mutually negotiated process with varying degrees of appropriateness and varying outcomes. When people are able to understand the identities that are manifest and able to describe differences in meanings and norms, they can begin to negotiate what would be more appropriate and effective for both of them’. Niki Davis explains: ‘In order to survive today’s complex world, people need to understand different cultures. Understanding different cultures helps people adjust to unfamiliar environments in which they meet, work and live with other people who have different cultures. Adjustment and positive attitudes toward different cultures prompts people to take active roles in the diverse society. Therefore, acquisition of intercultural competence, which is the capacity to change one’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures, has become a critical issue for individuals to survive in the globalized society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Davis, 2005, p.4). Intercultural competence is therefore a key to success in today’s changing world, the way to be successful in doing business with different cultures and people from various cultures.

### **2.1.2 General description**

After looking at some definitions of intercultural competence, it is easier to explain what intercultural competence is and how it works. Intercultural competence is useful in intercultural interactions in which actors experience uncertainty, surprises or conflict (Antal & Friedman, 2007).



The world these days is becoming more open, people are traveling around the globe, workforce is moving, workplaces are globally becoming more diverse and intercultural competence comes in strong when there is a need to go to a completely different environment, face cultural differences, learn to survive in surroundings different from those the expatriate is accustomed to. An intercultural competent person demonstrates affective, behavioral, and cognitive abilities, such as openness, empathy, adaptive motivation, perspective taking, behavioral flexibility, and person-centered communication. Thus, intercultural competence can be defined as transformation of learning into desired attitudes, and a growth process where an individual's existing knowledge about culture is evolving to intercultural knowledge, attitude, and behavior (Davis, 2005). Intercultural competence includes various traits and characteristics required to survive in a different culture and to act in mature way while facing situations that are new to the expatriate. Those traits and abilities come from the expatriates' psycho-sociological background, from their willingness to understand, from their personalities and their readiness to take up challenging tasks and to learn from the new culture.

To be able to tackle a challenging task of working in a new destination, the expatriate has to analyze the environment, to find out as much as possible about the country, its culture, values and beliefs, especially when one has to change from a low-context culture to a high-context one or vice versa. However, even countries in the same context culture often differ significantly along other cultural dimensions, so someone who is going to work abroad has to do research in order to be prepared to deal with the task he or she is sent to.

### **2.1.3 Required traits**

Intercultural competence requires some specific traits, which make it easier to adapt to another culture and help to survive in a different environment. Alvino E. Fantini names those traits that are the commonly cited traits of intercultural competence: flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, and suspending judgments, among others (Fantini, 2001). Some of those traits can be developed through training, e.g. tolerance of ambiguity and suspending judgments, others, like flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity and empathy are common characteristic traits that a person has. Not everyone can go to a foreign country, adapt and live there, as some can encounter difficulties due to the lack

of those traits.

There are some other traits required to be ready to deal with a challenge in the best possible way. A person needs to have courage to go abroad and to live there since a foreign country with its specific culture and customs might be a big surprise rather than something an expatriate has imagined. Friendliness might come in handy in a different country, as the person may feel pretty lonely there. There will be no family or friends to support and the ability of making friends may ease getting acquainted with the country and its people and help through hard times and a culture shock that might hit when starting life in a foreign country.

Many theorists include some other traits into their lists. Widely mentioned are open-mindedness, cultural empathy and non-judgmental perceptiveness. Personal strength and stability occurs in different forms as an important trait for successful intercultural communicators. Resourcefulness and ability to deal with stress recur throughout intercultural communication competency research (Williams, 2005).

#### **2.1.4 My point of view**

These days the world is getting ever more diverse, globalization can be found in nearly every single aspect of our lives. The definition of intercultural competence is becoming more frequently used. But nevertheless it is difficult to say what it really implies. Theorists describe it in different ways and there is still no single description that could accurately explain this concept. In my opinion, intercultural competence is the ability to read different cultures, to translate them into your own, to be open and ready to take risks. A person needs to be free from judging, to be good-natured, ready to learn and interested in the given task.

## **2.2 Problems resulting from the lack of intercultural competence**

However, not everyone who goes to work in a foreign country is interculturally competent. That can cause a great deal of problems while staying abroad. To begin with, it might be difficult to start a new life in a foreign country as the expatriate can become homesick and consequently even quit.

Cross-cultural miscommunication can result in lost opportunities, such as losing a job or a business deal, which could be detrimental to the financial and economic well-being of individuals and organizations. Conversely, effective cross-cultural communication can open up employment and business opportunities that may not be

otherwise available to the participants (Mor Barak, 2005).

Some of the possible problems are detailed below.

## **2.2.1 Cultural differences**

### **2.2.1.1 Individual's perspective**

A lack of awareness in cultural differences can lead to serious consequences in business environment. People from different backgrounds have different values, attitudes and customs. Business requires both parties to be well aware of that fact. For example, different negotiation cultures can lead to misunderstandings. Negotiators can come from different time orientation zones, polychronic or monochronic. Negotiators from those different time zones also tend to behave in business situations in a different way.

Negotiators from polychronic zone tend to start and end meetings at flexible time, take breaks when it seems appropriate, be comfortable with a high flow of information, expect to read each others' thoughts and minds, sometimes overlap talk and view start times as flexible and not take lateness personally. While negotiators from monochronic culture tend to prefer prompt beginnings and endings, schedule breaks, deal with one agenda at a time, rely on specific, detailed and explicit communication, prefer to talk in sequence and view lateness as devaluing or evidence of lack of respect (LeBaron, 2003).

Another problem that might arise when meeting business partners or people from different backgrounds is space orientation. The perception of personal space varies widely from country to country. It is important to know what a culturally acceptable distance of standing from each other is, whether it is acceptable to touch people when talking to them or if eye contact should be kept all the time. While in some cultures people get very close to each other when communicating, other cultures may find it uncomfortable or even offensive and they will start backing away.

Common things as it might seem for a person from a modern society might come as a problem when being transferred. Those are religion, clothing and food. Religion might be the largest problem while going to Muslim countries, as Muslims tend to take their religion very seriously. Food can come as a big surprise in all countries as every country has its own cuisine and eating traditions. People must be aware of some basic rules like not serving a very specific national dish to people from different cultures as they may find it rather strange or even unacceptable. While

entertaining a diverse group of people it is best to serve some simple dish, which is popular all over the world, but at the same one should taking into account cultural differences and remember that some cultures may refrain from eating certain food, like pork in the Muslim world.

The Muslim society is among the largest in the world with very specific rules about dress code and religion. Islamic practices are rigorous compared with those of most other religions. Many devout Muslim women wear loose-fitting clothes and head scarves in public. Muslims pray five times a day, first washing hands and feet (Schellhardt, 1999). An expatriate has to respect their rules and their way of life, which might be very difficult for those that come from a different background. However, a failure to comply with their rules and way of life may make an expatriate look both ridiculous and impolite and even may lead to being declared a criminal.

Clothing has long been used to communicate rank, mood, occasion, and even seasons. Clothes are an extension of the body and closely relate to the person's gender, age, socioeconomic status, and national origin. When doing business in a foreign country, one often faces the question of whether to wear the business attire that is common in one's own culture or in the host country. Although in modern times the Western business suit goes a long way for men, it is not the same for women. Western clothes may be perceived as inappropriately revealing by many cultures, and wearing them might be interpreted as disrespectful to the host culture and be perceived as offensive (Mor Barak, 2005). In order to avoid misunderstandings, expatriates should do their research before going to a foreign country.

People use different gestures, silence and postures to express their feelings or attitudes towards a subject, so it is important to be well aware of what one or another sign means in a particular culture in order to interpret the given signs correctly. Nonverbal communication may be very important in some cultures while it may be quite the opposite in others. People from low-context cultures are not so much concerned about non-verbal communication as are people from high-context cultures. The latter try to translate body language, as they tend to understand the real implications of the conversation judging by different body language signs. The message that is received may be different from the one that was intended because of the cultural barriers on the part of receivers and transmitters. Take for example gender differences in perceptions of sexual meanings. A man may perceive a woman's

behavior as flirtatious when her original intent was simply courteous and entirely nonsexual, leading to severe misunderstandings. Miscommunication occurs when the original intent of the person transmitting the message is different from the meaning that is received by the other person, and it is more likely to occur between participants who belong to different cultures (Mor Barak, 2005).

For intercultural communication it is also very important to distinguish the semiotic use of artifacts. Objects can convey direct messages, i.e., serve as a signal, as an appeal or as a request for action. The structure of corridors and rooms or the position of the chairs around a table give clear signals to the participants in a business meeting where they have to go and where they must (and where they must not) sit down. The same is true for the cigarette or the vodka-glass offered to the business partner, or the tea-cup, the spittoon or the towel handed to the guest. Clear as the signals are to the native, they can be irritating to the foreigner. The filled vodka-glass can, apart from the invitation to drink, also imply a request to bring out a toast for the hosts that must not be denied; and the towel reached before or after the meal may have to be regarded not so much as a courtesy but rather as a request to undergo a necessary cleansing ritual (Roth, 2001).

The science of management, which is a discipline dealing with the aspects of people working together in organizations to achieve certain common goals, studies the ways of avoiding a negative impact of different cultures on the functioning of organizations and tries to develop models for successfully adapting strategies and structures to different cultural environments. The reasons for this development can certainly be found in the fact that cultural factors have a direct relevance for companies: if the organizational structures, the management of human resources, the hierarchies or forms of communication is in conflict with certain cultural prerequisites, the performance of the organization will suffer (Steinwachs, 1999).

#### **2.2.1.2 Company's perspective**

Managing culturally different teams might be a big challenge for the leaders. Managers should be well prepared to take up the task as diverse teams might find themselves in trouble and they will expect the management to help them and to lead them out of conflicts or confusing situations. Multicultural teams that are able to create a synergistic culture outperform those teams that fail to integrate the cultures of individual members into a unified group culture. Token teams often fail to create a

synergistic culture that integrates the perspective of the one, different token member into the whole. The leader must learn to help the team to integrate its diversity if the team is to function productively (Adler & Gundersen, 2008). A leader must help the team through hard times, show them courage and explain the importance of the ability of viewing things from a different perspective in order to be successful.

It is very important to recognize the cultural differences within the team. To enhance the recognition of differences, team members should first describe each culture present without either interpreting or evaluating it. Before they can begin to increase understanding and respect, team members must become aware of their own stereotypes and the ways in which they might inadvertently limit their expectations of fellow team members from other cultures (Adler & Gundersen, 2008). When the team members and the management perceive the differences of other team members and become ready to interpret, it becomes easier for them to use the new members from different cultures to increase productivity and to find further ways of using the new members and their ideas in business.

In multinational teams, leaders must guard against vesting disproportionate power in host-country members, members of the same nationality as the employing organization, members from the most technologically advanced or economically developed countries, or members with ideologies most consonant with their own (Adler & Gundersen, 2008).

### **2.2.2 Intercultural effectiveness**

Behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive and personality trait factors have been recognized as the main determinants of intercultural effectiveness. Expatriates' 'socio-biographical' background, such as their ethnicity, age, nationality, educational qualification, profession (role) and religion is among the most significant factors that can impact the intercultural effectiveness.

Many organizations have realized that intercultural effectiveness is a matter of concern not only because they have to deal with foreign cultures, but also because the workforce of the future is growing increasingly more diverse within their own borders. Geertz (1973) indicates that, knowing how culturally different people think and act does not make one member of that culture nor does it guarantee that one will successfully think and act like them. To be successful in such surroundings the expatriate should have good personality traits and mainly social skills (Mamman,

1995).

The behavioral factor is a very important dimension of intercultural effectiveness. It means the ability to establish interpersonal relationships and the ability to communicate effectively, which includes the capacity of entering into a meaningful dialogue, initiating an interaction, coping with misunderstanding with strangers and dealing with interpersonal conflict and different communication styles.

Weakness in training and personality traits might be a problem when dealing with a foreign country and an unusual environment. A person must be curious, open-minded and motivated to endure in a different culture. Training, on the other hand, should help the expatriate with communication skills, to introduce the host country and should help to be prepared for dealing with the problems that might arise while staying there.

Ethnicity may also influence the intercultural effectiveness. It may be expressed in physical appearance, material culture, customs, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. It is especially true when an expatriate and the host are extremely different, in any of the previously mentioned ways. People tend to compare themselves to the host and it may be difficult to adapt if the differences are very significant.

Nationality comes in very strong when talking about intercultural effectiveness. It is to do with where the expatriates come from, the way they behave, dress or talk. A lot of nationalities worldwide have a stereotype, which other people see when talking about some particular nationality. It is very much like labeling somebody. The stereotypical image the host holds of the expatriates' nationality can be influenced by a prior experience with people from the expatriates' country, international relations, studies and colonial/imperial history.

When dealing with foreign languages and different cultures, language fluency and cultural fluency are not the same, although they are related. Language fluency refers to the possession of linguistic skills that allow one to function much like a native speaker of a language. Cultural fluency refers to the ability to identify, understand, and apply cultural variables that influence the communicative behaviors of members of the group so that the meanings of the messages of both the sender and receiver regularly match (Mor Barak, 2005). However, knowing a native language of a host country helps to be interculturally effective. It is always easier to break the ice and to communicate when there are no problems expressing oneself. Nevertheless, an

expatriate should be careful about that, as in some cultures the host does not want an expatriate to talk their language and rather feels more comfortable talking the expatriate's language. In some cultures 'locals' consider their social interaction with the expatriate as a 'learning exercise' to know more about 'foreign cultures'. Therefore, in certain cultural settings, the expatriate's occasional use of his/her native language will be highly appreciated by the hosts (Mamman, 1995). However, the use of different languages often creates a barrier to communication because one or both sides are not as articulate as they could be in their native tongues. Articulating the thoughts could be more difficult, and the end message may not be exactly what it was intended to be (Mamman, 1995).

### **2.2.3 Diversity in the workplace**

#### **2.2.3.1 Individual's perspective**

Diversity might be understood as variety in the workplace in which all people are referred to as unique individuals, or as difference, in which specific groups of people are regarded as being different with a respect to a dominant group. Today's work force is becoming increasingly diverse as a result of changes in immigration patterns (Christensen, 1993).

Hofstede (1980) defined four dimensions of culture based on his research: power distance – the relationship with authority and social inequality; individualism vs. collectivism – the relationship between the individual and the group; masculinity vs. femininity – the tendency toward assertiveness in contrast to modesty; and, avoidance of uncertainty – the control of aggression and expressions of emotions (Mor Barak, 2005). Those four measures explain relationships between individuals at the workplace, their expectations, and needs and the workplace.

Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. In large power distance societies the hierarchical system is considered existential. Applying this principle to the workplace, supervisors and subordinates consider themselves as existentially unequal. Subordinates are considered to be told what to do, and superiors are entitled to special privileges. In contrast, in small power distance societies, subordinates and supervisors consider themselves as existentially equal. The hierarchical strata in the organizations are considered permeable, providing the possibility for both subordinates and supervisors



to move up or down the ladder, and supervisors are expected to be accessible to subordinates (Mor Barak, 2005). In small power distance societies the supervisors are even called by their first name and take part in decision-making, something that large power distance societies would not understand.

Individualism pertains to societies where the ties between individuals are loose. Collectivism pertains to societies where people are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups, which continue to protect them throughout a lifetime in exchange for unquestioned loyalty. Collectivism is evident in the workplace where the relationship between the employer and the employees in the organization is seen as a family relationship. There are mutual obligations with strong loyalty on the part of the employee connected to an employer's commitment for protection and security in return. Employee loyalty in this context refers to an unwritten contract that requires employees to be faithful to their duties, to their managers and co-workers, and to their organization. On the other hand, typical employees in an individualist society would most likely view their employer as rewarding individual initiative and effort. People are expected to act depending on their own interests. The relationship between employees and employers is based, therefore, not on group loyalty but on complementing self-interests. In approaching work assignments, employees in a collectivist society would emphasize working together and would view relationships to be more important than the task, whereas the reverse would be true in an individualist society where the task would prevail over the relationship.

Masculinity pertains to societies where gender roles are clearly distinct. Femininity pertains to societies where the social gender roles overlap (both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life). The dimension refers to the extent to which dominant values in the society emphasize assertiveness, competition, and material achievements, attributes associated with masculine qualities, as compared to feminine qualities such as relationships among people, care for others, and care for quality of life in general. In masculine societies, assertiveness, ambition, and competitiveness are expected and rewarded in the work context. In contrast, employees who show modesty, solidarity, and care for others are rather values in feminine societies. In the latter, there is a preference for solving work-related conflicts by compromise and negotiation, whereas in masculine societies, power struggles and direct confrontation may be more common in conflict resolution.

Managers in feminine societies take their employees' needs into consideration and strive for consensus, whereas managers in masculine societies are expected to be assertive and decisive. The balance between work and family is also greatly different in both types of societies. In feminine societies, fathers often take time out of work to take care of a young or sick child. In contrast, in masculine societies, the mother typically takes care of the children, and the father is expected to continue with his work as usual.

Avoidance of uncertainty refers to the extent to which the members of the culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations – the extent to which they need predictability in the form of written and unwritten rules. In high uncertainty avoidance societies, there are many rules that govern the behavior of employees, as well as the work process. In low uncertainty avoidance societies, there are fewer regulations and a general belief that there should not be more rules that are strictly necessary. High job mobility is prevalent and expected in societies with low uncertainty avoidance, and job stability and lifetime employment are more common and cherished in societies with high uncertainty avoidance (Mor Barak, 2005).

Business communication can be interpreted very differently, depending on the cultural orientation of a particular country. For example, in masculine societies, an effective manager is one who communicates directly, assertively, and even aggressively. Those from feminine-leaning societies may interpret such behavior as unfriendly, arrogant, and even rude.

#### **2.2.3.2 Managing diversity**

In response to the growing diversity in the workforce around the world, many companies have instituted specific policies and programs to enhance recruitment, inclusion, promotion, and retention of employees who are different from the privileged echelons of society. Diversity management policies and programs are designed to create a welcoming organizational environment to those groups that, in the past and through the present, have not had access to employment, in general, and to more lucrative jobs, in particular.

Typically, individuals are attracted to organizations that appear to have members with values similar to their own. In turn, organizations select new members that are similar to their existing members because their hiring continues to make everyone feel comfortable (Mor Barak, 2005). As organizations are becoming quite similar and

everyone working at them fits and has similar views and values, someone who is different does not fit, and eventually leaves. It is bad news for the organization, as the organization does not evolve and diversify in step with an ever more diverse society around it; therefore, in the long run no new ideas come in and the company may fade away. In order to overcome this problem, diversity management has to come with some ideas how to deal with the diversity and make new people feel welcome.

Diversity enlargement focuses on increasing the representation of individuals of different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds in the organization. The goal is to change the organizational culture by changing the demographic composition of the workforce. Diversity sensitivity recognizes the potential difficulties introduced by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures in the workplace. It attempts to overcome these difficulties through diversity training that is aimed at sensitizing employees to stereotyping and discrimination while also promoting communication collaboration (Mor Barak, 2005).

The need for diversity management becomes quite apparent these days, as the world and all workplaces are getting ever more diverse. The diversity is not going to leave; on the contrary, there will be more about the diversity in the future. Diversity management is required for ethical issues as well, to help expatriates feel welcome and not afraid of demonstrating their ideas after they move to a new and different environment. It can also help the organization to come with new ideas. Without it, the company might lose its competitive advantage in the long run.

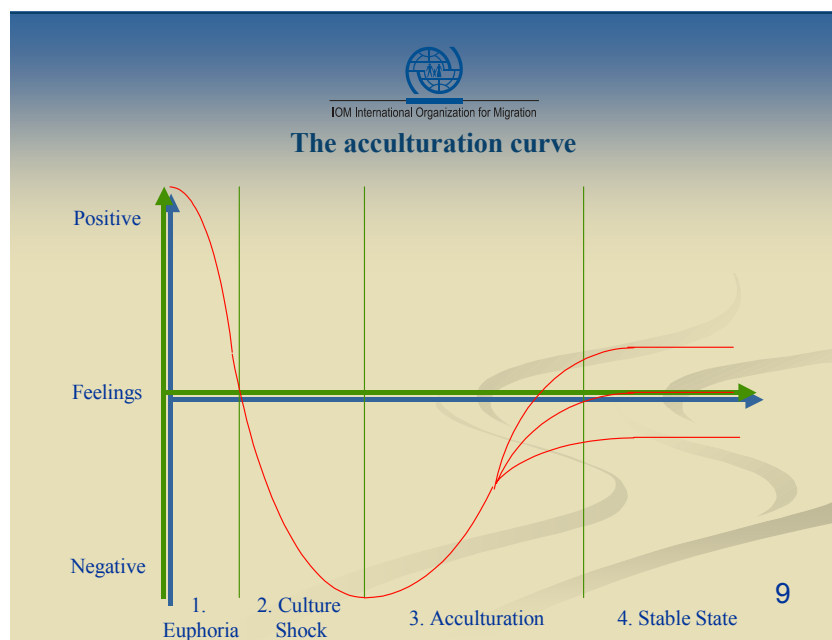
#### **2.2.4 Cultural shock**

There are a number of standard psychological and social processes, which tend to accompany intercultural encounters. The simplest form of intercultural encounter is between a foreign individual and a new cultural environment.

A foreigner usually experiences some form of cultural shock. Our mental software contains basic values. These have been acquired early in our lives, and they have become so natural as to be unconscious. Based upon them are our conscious and more superficial manifestations of culture: rituals, heroes, and symbols. Inexperienced foreigners can make an effort to learn some of the symbols and rituals of the new environment but it is unlikely for them to recognize the underlying values. In a way, visitors to a foreign culture return to the mental state of an infant, where they have to learn the simplest things once again. This usually leads to a feeling of distress,

helplessness, and hostility towards the new environment. Often the physical functioning of the person is affected.

People on temporary assignment to a foreign cultural environment often report an acculturation curve. In figure 1, feelings (positive or negative) are plotted on the vertical axis; time is on the horizontal one. Phase 1 is a (usually short) period of euphoria: a honeymoon, the excitement of traveling and new sights. Phase 2 is the period of cultural shock when real life starts in the new environment. Phase 3, acculturation, sets in when the visitor has slowly learned to function under the new conditions, has adopted some of the local values, finds increased self-confidence and becomes integrated into a new social network. Phase 4 is the stable state of mind eventually reached. It may remain negative compared to home, for example if the visitor continues feeling alien and discriminated. It may be just as good as before, in which case the visitor can be considered to be bi-culturally adapted, or it may even be better. In the latter case the visitor has ‘gone native’ – i.e. become more Roman than the Romans.



**Figure 1.** The acculturation curve (Coverdale-Jones, 2005, p.14)

The length of the time scale is arbitrary; it seems to adapt to the length of the expatriation period. People in short assignments of up to three months have reported euphoria, culture shock, and acculturation phases within this period; people on long assignments of several years have reported culture shock phases of a year or more

before acculturation set in.

Culture shocks and the corresponding physical symptoms may be so severe that assignments have to be terminated prematurely. Culture shock problems of accompanying spouses, more often than those of the expatriated employees themselves, seem to be the reason for early return (Hofstede, 1997, p. 209-210).

However, after a long stay abroad another type of problem may come up. It is called a reverse cultural shock. Returning home is usually very exciting, a lot of dreams and wishes are built up, the person expects to return to a normal life they used to live before being transferred and a reverse cultural shock might hit when things are not as the returnee imagines them to be and come in as a surprise. Familiar places could be not so familiar anymore. While there may be things a person still recognizes, any town or city is bound to have changed. There will be new streets; new traffic lights, new buildings and shopping centers, perhaps even whole new neighborhoods (Storti, 2003). The feelings about the city the returnee once knew may change after staying abroad. The person may feel differently about old things that used to be familiar and likeable before the transfer. The city or town may seem too crowded or too empty, what used to be cozy may not be the same anymore, the traffic may appear to be too heavy or there might seem too few cars on the streets. The returnee is now confronted by behaviors and circumstances that now seem as different as many of those they encountered when they first arrived abroad. From the perspective of the new norms, home is now strange, and the person reacts in much the same way as when first got to the host country: environment is confusing, frustrating, disgusting and just plain wrong (Storti, 2003).

Reentering usually takes some time, with a reverse cultural shock following. However, the person should remember from their previous experience of moving abroad that it takes time to adjust. The content of reentry consists of four stages: leave-taking and departure; the honeymoon; a reverse cultural shock; and readjustment. The problem for many returnees is that while they can readily imagine that moving abroad and adjusting to a foreign culture might be a transition, they see coming home as just a matter of arriving at a certain place on a certain time (Storti, 2003).

The first stage of reentering takes place while the person is still in the host country. The thoughts are already home, the person is excited to meet people they

used to know before the transfer, to see the places that were left behind. This stage begins even months before leaving the country, when there is a need to arrange all needed things before departure. Emotionally, this is a bittersweet time. While the expatriate is looking forward to going home and seeing family and friends again, it is also difficult at the prospect of leaving overseas life and friends behind (Storti, 2003).

After returning home, the honeymoon stage takes over. It is the time when everyone is excited to see the returnee, there are still no duties, and life reminds of a holiday. The returnee does things that were missing in the foreign country, has no responsibilities yet, and is simply enjoying the stay. During this stage usually everything seems to be perfect, there are no problems and everyone is very helpful and excited. Depending on the circumstances, the honeymoon stage may last anywhere from a week or two to as long as a month.

Reverse culture shock normally sets in when visits with family and friends have finished and the time has come to settle down and start a new life back home (Storti, 2003). While at the honeymoon stage everything was perfect and nothing was upsetting, at this stage the returnee can face judgmental problems and it may seem that everything around is wrong and not the way it should be. During this stage the returnee starts noticing that things have changed during the stay abroad and that nothing is the way it used to be before the transfer.

Readjustment is the last phase of reentry. This is when a returnee starts facing the real life at the home country and is already able to compare life there and abroad. The experience from a transfer helps. Life back home comes to a normal flow. However, readjustment should not be understood as the closing of the book on the overseas experience, for in a larger sense, reentry never truly ends. After all, people do not actually get over experiences, especially profound ones; instead they incorporate them into their character and personality and respond to all subsequent experience from the perspective of their new self (Storti, 2003).

### **3 Methodology**

The methodology was based on gathering and analyzing data from people who have been expatriates themselves or who have worked with people from different cultures in their home country and abroad. The findings are derived from a qualitative research, interviewing five people. The qualitative research was chosen in order to get an objective opinion on the problem. Those were in-depth interviews to get a deeper understanding of the respondents' intercultural experience. The people were interviewed in April 2009 by e-mail or face-to-face. The interview was built on structured questions (Appendix 1) while the answers were based on individual experiences. The obtained information covered types of communication between the people and job experience; traits required to be interculturally competent; problems that arose from adaptation and cultural differences; cultural shock; suggestions on what can be possibly done to overcome the problems stemming from the lack of intercultural competence. Subject to the respondent's consent, the interviews were recorded on a laptop. None of the respondents objected to their responses being recorded and all of them consented to their names being referred to in the paper. The transcripts of the interviews are presented the appendix (Appendix 2).

## **4 Findings – the results from the interviews**

### **4.1 Adaptation problems**

After talking to previous expatriates and people who have experience in an intercultural environment, I concluded that not all the respondents had had problems of adapting to a foreign culture or communicating with other cultures. However, the person who said he had had no problems was at ease with intercultural communication and he is currently working with a Western country, which does not greatly differ from Iceland. Everybody else mentioned some problems when being transferred and while adapting to a new culture and life there. There was no common problem faced during the adaptation stage; nevertheless, people did not hesitate saying that problems did emerge. Hjörtur M. Scheving, who had worked in Lithuania for two years, said that it had been difficult to get accustomed to the grave atmosphere of the work place. ‘Everyone was dead serious, concentrating on their jobs, so it felt like you were whispering all the time while you were working. There was really no sound in the building, but still there were around 20-30 people working there’ (H. Scheving, personal interview, April 5, 2009). Goda Sabaliauskaite mentioned some things of her previous experience in North England: ‘We don’t use so many words to express our feelings. Or use the same word that could mean both positive and negative things. For example, you can say that something is *crazy* in a good way or a bad way. So it differs in what context you use which words. Another thing that many people from post Soviet countries have to deal with is a lack of polite words in the conversation. We don’t use as many *thank you’s*, and as many *here you are’s* as people do in England. Also the chitchat, I mean, talking about nothing that English people are very well known for. Also queuing, English people can queue for hours without any signs of despair, they seem to like that’ (G.Sabaliauskaite, personal interview, April 9, 2009).

### **4.2 Problems of intercultural effectiveness**

Language is an important measure of intercultural effectiveness. Theorists agree that knowing a local language may help to overcome misunderstandings; it makes it easier to express oneself and to communicate with the locals. Gunnar Jónsson who lived and worked in China for almost two years confronted problems because his language knowledge was not sufficient: ‘I always had to ask some Chinese to accompany me during a meal out, because the menu was always in Chinese only and no other



language. When I went out for a meal, I used to borrow a menu from another inspector who had already translated it. So I could order from it. Later on, when I knew what was right for me, I would ask the waiter to write the name down for me in Chinese. <...> A technician speaks English, but an ordinary Chinese doesn't speak English at all' (G. Jónsson, personal interview, April 7, 2009). He also mentioned that people on the streets were curious about them and tried to talk to them, however, the communication was impossible because he did not know the language. Hjörtur M. Scheving said that an insufficient knowledge of language used to cause some misunderstandings in the work environment: 'It was difficult to explain things, even though IT is an English-based work environment and most programmers speak English. But quite often there were problems getting the requirements and making things clear. Also as English is not our mother tongue, sometimes it was difficult and led to misunderstanding' (H. Scheving, personal interview, April 5, 2009). Nevertheless, those who knew the language of the host country had no problems in communicating and it was easier for them to express themselves and to overcome problems.

Intercultural effectiveness can partially depend on the expatriate's nationality, ethnicity, and educational background. According to Mor Barak (2005), ethnicity and nationality might be especially important when the host and the expatriate are very different. A person tries to compare oneself to another person and it may be uncomfortable and difficult to be interculturally effective. Two of the respondents felt this during their time overseas. They were in countries where they greatly differed from the locals. During his stay in Ghana, Hjörtur M. Scheving experienced overwhelming attention of the locals: 'You are pointed at in the street and called a 'White man' all the time; or when you walk along the street women, who are selling things, touch your legs' (H. Scheving, personal interview, April 5, 2009). Being tall and white, Gunnar Jónsson was considered to be a very interesting person in China as well. Chinese people were trying to talk to him all the time and watching him wherever he went. It should be mentioned, however, that none of them had any bad experiences related to the differences in ethnicity. Goda Sabaliauskaite, on the other hand, had some problems being interculturally effective during her last months in Britain, which was related to her nationality. She explains: 'Some British started blaming on the new European Union member country immigrants as the

unemployment was getting higher and higher, so some British couldn't get the jobs and they were blaming immigration' (G. Sabaliauskaite, personal interview, April 9, 2009).

### **4.3 Cultural shock**

In one way or another, a cultural shock strikes many people after they move abroad, whether to study or to work. The country may not be very different but some minor issues can come as a cultural shock for the newcomers. Hofstede (1997) suggests that a culture shock comes in four stages: honeymoon, culture shock, acculturation, and the stable mind. However, the practice shows that not everyone experiences all the stages or at least those stages are minor and people disregard to them. Usually the strongest cultural shock hits when the country of destination is very different from everything the person is familiar with. Hjörtur M. Scheving experienced a huge cultural shock when he went to Ghana, as every little detail was absolutely different from everything he was used to. After moving to Iceland, Sandra Bruneikaite experienced a cultural shock when she started thinking about settling down there: 'I started worrying if I could live there, whether I should stay there, how it would go to make friends, to adapt myself in the country' (S. Bruneikaite, personal interview, April 18, 2009).

### **4.4 Cultural differences**

Theorists point out that cultural differences exist in everyday life. Those can be very common things like religion, clothing and food. It might be very intimidating for people from different cultures to adapt and accept those differences as a commonplace thing in some cultures. The Muslim society has very rigid rules regarding their culture and their way of life. Hjörtur M. Scheving confronted some problems with the Muslims while he was studying in Denmark: 'Some groups were complicated because some of the girls were Muslim, so you had to think about the environment you were working in, you couldn't really do the work at home as they would refuse to come to your place because they are not allowed to be alone with a male person outside their family' (H. Scheving, personal interview, April 5, 2009). Goda Sabaliauskaite also mentioned the way women from this culture dress: 'It was a little bit strange only to be able to see a person's eyes' (G. Sabaliauskaite, personal interview, April 9, 2009). Gunnar Jónsson told that he had been surprised with the food when he first went to

China, especially when he was not supposed to ask what he was eating. However, he mentioned that food there was good and always fresh, but different.

#### **4.5 Diversity in the workplace**

Diversity in the workplace, according to Hofstede (1980) is based on four different measures: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and avoidance of uncertainty. The respondents also experienced diversity at their workplaces in the host countries. The power distance was especially high in Eastern countries like Lithuania and China, while in Western countries the hierarchy appeared to be less important. According to Hjörtur M. Scheving, the managers in Lithuania were even somewhat untouchable rather than someone you can go and talk to without an appointment. In Western countries, on the contrary, it is not offensive to use the first name while talking to the managers. He also mentioned that Lithuania is a very individualistic society where everyone is doing their own assignments. Collectivism was very strong in China. As Gunnar Jónsson pointed out, ‘A Chinese never works alone. Ten or twenty of them always work together’ (G. Jónsson, personal interview, April 7, 2009). He was really surprised about how strong the collectivism at the workplace is and how committed people are. If the company needs them to work long hours, they never refuse and always stay long hours, even though they do not get paid for that a lot.

#### **4.6 Suggestions for future expatriates**

Theorists identify a lot of different traits that are required for intercultural competence and I asked the respondents what they thought about them. The commonly mentioned traits include flexibility, open-mindedness, curiosity, social-initiative, ability to deal with stress, emotional stability, patience, and humor. Some of them come with training while others are inborn characteristics of a person. I asked the respondents what they thought about them and if any of those traits could help to be interculturally competent. All the respondents agreed that almost all those traits could facilitate intercultural competence. However, humor was not seen as a necessity. It can help but it was not a very important trait. Gunnar Jónsson suggested that optimism is a very important and vital trait. In his opinion one has to be positive and people should go abroad only if they know how to sell themselves. Herbert Pedersen thinks that flexibility should also come with the ability to meet at the midpoint.

All the respondents had intercultural experience, whether working or studying abroad or with different cultures in their home country. They had to tackle problems arising due to cultural differences, a lack of awareness or intercultural competence. However, after experiencing life away from home and finding out that it is not always easy and various misunderstandings may come up, they suggested various ways of dealing with the problems. Almost all of them agreed that finding information about a host country could help a lot. An expatriate can find out about the customs and the way of life there, learn the basic rules about the common ethical norms and life style. People are always extremely happy to see that newcomers know something about the country they came to. Demonstrating interest in the host's culture helps breaking the ice, making new friends and earning respect. To be able to talk about a host country, you need to do your homework before leaving. It is important to read about the host country, to find out a little bit about their history, art, cities and what the country is famous for. <...> If possible, talking to someone who has already been to a particular country could help a lot. An expatriate would acquire about someone else's knowledge, learn how others experienced it and would be ready for possible surprises. Usually important information is published on Embassy pages of the country. It can help going through the homepage in order to know the basic legal information and how to behave if something happens. <...> Before leaving, people should evaluate themselves and decide whether they are ready to take the challenge and if they can survive in a culturally different country. It might help talking to other people that know the expatriate, finding out their opinion whether the future expatriate has the characteristics required to survive in a different country and is ready to abandon the habitual life. A possible aid is workshops, which can help as well. Taking a course on cultural shock and understanding that this is a widespread process that many immigrants face help to survive it. Workshops could challenge the person to see a different point of view, to understand that life can be different from the customary routine. For example, in Muslim societies men start eating before women do and it might be offensive for female expatriates coming from Western countries, but this is the way they live there and it is a cultural habit that no one is offended by.

Nevertheless, despite all upcoming problems and misunderstandings, all respondents agreed that being an expatriate was a very interesting experience and none of them regretted about having tried living in a different culture and confronting

the problems. To be interculturally competent, a person needs to be a good communicator, to know the customs of the country and to be able to deal with stress. Awareness of the basic facts about the country, its history, and culture is essential in seeking competence and developing the ability to respect cultural differences. If there is a possibility, one should learn the language or at least some words could help. People become more helpful and positive if a newcomer shows interest in their way of life, knows some important facts about the country and shows interest in their culture. Hjörtur M. Scheving suggested being open-minded and going for it. In his opinion, it is good to have some safety net if there were some problems and things failed to work, but he insisted that it was a great experience not only in career terms but also in terms of his life in general.

## 5 Discussion

The thesis is based on a research into intercultural competence, i.e. the concept of it becoming broadly used and essential in the globalization process. The world is becoming very open, people are moving from one country to another and they face difficulties in getting accustomed to different cultures. Intercultural competence helps to overcome those problems and to find the best solutions in dealing with them.

After talking to former expatriates and analyzing the problems arising from the lack of intercultural competence, I concluded that being interculturally competent is far more important than I could envisage. People need special characteristics in order to survive in a different environment. I listed the traits commonly mentioned by theorists and all the respondents to the questionnaire agreed that those traits can help to be interculturally competent and tackle the difficulties. Respondents brought up the difficulties related to adjusting to a new culture; however, they insisted that being open-minded, flexible and having other characteristics helped them a lot. Optimism and positive thinking helped many of them through the adjustment period and all of them agreed that it was an interesting experience that somebody who can take it, should never reject or hesitate.

I found out that usually it is advisable to learn about the host country before going there, to do the homework, so that the new surroundings do not come as a huge surprise. Knowing the language, of course, could help, but that is not enough, although it would not help if the expatriate is not an outgoing person. There is a need for workshops for those going to live and work abroad, which would help to prepare for the journey in a better way. In the future I would like to see research into the traits required to be interculturally competent. To get a better picture of what is needed to be interculturally competent, I asked general questions about the traits and how they helped the expatriates through their experience. I would like to see those traits put on the scale of how important these traits are, which of them is the most important and which is the least. I would think that qualitative research cannot give a sufficient enough answer to that and that quantitative research is needed.

Nevertheless, regardless of how much people believe in being ready to move to a new culture, there will always be some things that will come as a surprise and appropriate personal traits can really help here.

## Bibliography

- Adler, N. J., & Gundersen, A. (2008). *International dimensions of organizational behavior*. Mason: Thomson South-Western.
- Antal, A. B., & Friedman, V. J. (2008). Learning to negotiate reality: a strategy for teaching intercultural competencies. *Journal of Management Education*, 32, 363-386.
- Byram, M. (January 2000). *Sprogforum: Tidsskrift for sprog- og kulturpædagogik*. Retrieved March 14, 2009, from <http://inet.dpb.dpu.dk/infodok/sprogforum/>
- Christensen, J. (1993). The diversity dynamic: Implications for organizations in 2005. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 17, 69-86.
- Coverdale-Jones, T. (2005). East Asian learners' response to intercultural themes as part of the year abroad in the UK. *Pedagogical research fund for languages, linguistics, and area studies in higher education*, 14. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from [www.llas.ac.uk](http://www.llas.ac.uk)
- Davis, N. (2005). Intercultural competence for future leaders of educational technology and its evaluation. *Interactive Educational Multimedia*, 10, 1-22.
- Deardorff, D. (2008). Developing and assessing intercultural competence. *Center for educational resources in culture, language and literacy*. Arizona.
- Fantini, A. E. (2001). *National council of less commonly taught languages*. Retrieved March 5, 2009, from [www.councilnet.org/papers/Fantini.doc](http://www.councilnet.org/papers/Fantini.doc)
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- LeBaron, M. (July 2003). *Culture-based negotiation styles*. Retrieved March 14, 2009, from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/>
- Mamman, A. (1995). Socio-biographical antecedents of intercultural effectiveness: the neglected factors. *British Journal of Management*, 6, 97-114.
- Matveev, A. V., & Milter, R. G. (2004). The value of intercultural competence for performance of multicultural teams. *Team Performance Management*, 10 (5/6), 104.
- Mor Barak, M. E. (2005). *Managing diversity: toward a globally inclusive workplace*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Roth, K. (2001). Material culture and intercultural communication. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25, 563-580.
- Schellhardt, T. D. (1999). Workplace: in a factory schedule, where does religion fit in? *The Wall Street Journal*, B.1.
- Steinwachs, K. (1999). Information and culture - the impact of national culture on information processes. *Journal of Information Science*, 25, 193-204.

Storti, C. (2003). *The art of coming home*. Boston: Intercultural Press: A Nicholas Brealey Publishing Company.

Thatcher, B. (2001). Issues of validity in intercultural professional communication research. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 15, 458-488.

Williams, T. R. (2005). Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9, 358-359.



## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1 – questionnaire**

Interview questions:

1. Previous overseas experience – when did you work abroad and where?
2. Did you have any problems adjusting?
3. What were the problems during your stay (language, cultural shock, differences in body language, religion, diversity in the workplace, timing, space orientation, clothing, ethnicity, nationality, educational background)?
4. What are the traits required for intercultural competence (open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, flexibility, patience, humor, curiosity, ability to deal with stress)?
5. What are the ways of dealing with the problems (need for training, finding information on the host country, reading)?
6. What is your advice for those going abroad? How to deal with the problems resulting from a lack of intercultural competence?

## **Appendix 2 - interviews**

Interview with Hjörtur Már Scheving on 5 April 2009.

**Interviewer: Introduce yourself with name, age and occupation.**

**Hjörtur:** My name is Hjörtur Már Scheving, I'm 35 and I'm a web-developer.

**Interviewer: When did you work abroad and where? I mean your previous overseas experience.**

**Hjörtur:** Well, I went to study in Denmark in 2000. I studied there for two and a half years and during that time I took half a year in Australia. Also I did three or four months in Lithuania at that time and during that time also I went to Ghana for three months. I was doing international computer science. It was very different, we were, like, from 12-14 different countries. So I had of course a lot of project work in that, a lot of group work, so you could say that some work experience I also have in working in intercultural environment. And after my studies, then I went to study in England, but during that time I lived in Lithuania. So I just took a bus sometimes between two countries to meet teachers once in a while and say 'Hello, here I am, I still try to study', then I went back to Lithuania. Then I was in Lithuania and I was there for two years in total. And in Lithuania I worked in a company called 'Sidabrinis tinklas' ('Silver Net'). It is a software company and I worked also for security company. We were doing a prototype for car tracking system for them. There I worked for about four months.

**Interviewer: That's a lot.**

**Hjörtur:** Ghana. I had some course, like computer courses there and I was mostly on my own. Denmark, I worked a little bit there, but there were just small jobs, and nothing really serious. Most of the experience that I have is through the studies, through the project work, and mostly of course, while working in Lithuania.

**Interviewer: Did you have any problems adjusting?**

**Hjörtur:** Well, yes, I mean.

**Interviewer: What were the problems then?**

**Hjörtur:** There are always problems when you are working in an intercultural environment, there are a lot of differences, it depends on who you are working with. We had problems in school, for example, when you are working with Muslims, for example, and sometimes their religion would come in a way, you know, that they need

to take a break to do a praying, or there is Ramadan going on and they can't work at this time or at these hours, or during that period, that often really complicated things. Some groups were complicated that because some of the girls were Muslim, so you should think about the environment that you were working in, you couldn't really work at home and they would come to you, because they are not allowed to be alone with a male person outside of their family. That sometimes can complicate things; you need to take into consideration these things. So that could be a problem sometimes, but you work around it. And, like when I was working in Lithuania, what really differed for me from working in Iceland is the seriousness of business culture. You have never heard anyone laughing; there was no real communication between the people that were working. Everyone was dead serious, concentrating on their jobs, so it felt like you were whispering all the time while you were working. There was really no sound in the building, but still there were around 20-30 people working there. It was really strange for us. I think that the work culture was the most different for us, from what we were used to. But no big problems in a way, it depends on how you are taking it yourself.

**Interviewer: Language? Was that a problem?**

**Hjörtur:** Language could be a problem of course.

**Interviewer: Was it a problem in Lithuania?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, it was difficult to explain things, even though IT is an English-based work environment and most programmers speak English. But it was quite often problems getting the requirements, making clear. Also because English is not our first language either, so it was sometimes difficult and caused sometimes some misunderstanding.

**Interviewer: Did you get any cultural shock at any of these places?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, I could say that, in Ghana. That's of course a huge difference from anything that you are used to.

**Interviewer: How different?**

**Hjörtur:** Everyday, the way they live, housing, food, just basic facilities, toilets, running water, anything. You are pointed at in the street and called 'White man' all the time, or walking on the street and women are selling something, touching your legs. All that kind of things. You are really a foreigner there. And you go through days there without seeing a white person and it is a big shock in a way. You have to get used to

living without running water as well.

**Interviewer: What is the best way of combating a cultural shock? Talking to somebody? To locals?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, of course, I mean, if you know some other people who have been there, but mainly it is up to your own attitude. If you decide yourself that it will be tough, that it will be horrible, then it is going to be, for sure, but if you have an open mind, then you will get through anything.

**Interviewer: So in your opinion, open-mindedness is among the main traits required to be interculturally competent?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, for sure. You must have, and be willing to take a challenge. You must understand that things will not be the same as you have at home. If you know that when you go, then you will live through anything. And of course, it is all quite different. When I came to Lithuania it was also different, but at a lesser scale. There is still culture that you have there, you see more poverty than we are used to, that we see in Iceland or Denmark. The things like taking a trolleybus, this is really different for us, stuffing 200 people in one bus until it is exploding. But again, if you have open mind, then it will be fine.

**Interviewer: Did you notice any differences in the body language? Too much touching or coming too close to talk to you?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, but that was most when I was in Africa, in Ghana. They are touching you more. I don't think this is because I am white, but also when I saw them communicating. There is no problem for two guys to hold hands while walking down the streets, it was normal for them.

**Interviewer: Did you feel uncomfortable about that?**

**Hjörtur:** No, not really. I was not holding hands, but no. Of course, it takes time to get used to, but again, open mind. There is difference, I don't know, in Lithuania I didn't see that much difference in body language. But they are trying to protect what they have.

**Interviewer: Any diversity in the workplace? For example, power distance?**

**Hjörtur:** Oh yes. Compared to working here in Iceland, you feel a lot of difference in Lithuania. The chain of command is very important. In Iceland it is much more informal, you get things done much faster, but when you get to Lithuania, where boss is really boss and untouchable in a way. If you have something to offer, you do not

just got there and talk to him, discuss some idea, some informal things. It is heavier there. I didn't like the way things were done there.

**Interviewer: Was the work environment rather individualistic or collectivistic?**

**Hjörtur:** In Lithuania it is much more individualistic, everyone is concentrating on their own stuff, less available for help. People are not approachable there.

**Interviewer: Clothing – did you find it different?**

**Hjörtur:** A little bit more formal than here in Iceland, but again, because I am in a software business, you just have your computer geeks, you don't see them walking around in suits. Maybe more with the bosses, they are dressing up a little bit more. But anyway, you feel more formal way there in Lithuania.

**Interviewer: Was your nationality a problem, I mean being a foreigner?**

**Hjörtur:** No, maybe it was exactly more of an advantage that you were different, something new, especially like in Ghana, then you get a lot of attention and you were very white. Maybe there you get some attention in a bad way also. Since you are white and you are in Africa that means that you have money. And in Ghana to ask another person for money is no problem. It is not considered rude or anything, so they would definitely approach you and ask you for money. That's no problem, it's natural. For us not to take it in a wrong way, it might be a problem. You need to understand that it is normal.

**Interviewer: Educational background? Did anyone ask for your evidences?**

**Hjörtur:** No, not really. But you can feel that educational background is much more important in Lithuania. They really look at your educational background, at what you have done. In Ghana – nobody cares. If you are white, then they believe you. In Lithuania, however, I felt this paper culture that you need to have done something.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk a bit about the traits that are required for intercultural competence. I want to know your opinion whether a specific trait is needed or not. You have already told me about open-mindedness. Do you need social initiative?

**Hjörtur:** Yes, but again it depends on the culture. Like in Ghana, you do not need it. They will come to you; they will initiate anything at all. In Lithuania, yes, you definitely need to initiate stuff.

**Interviewer: What about emotional stability?**

**Hjörtur:** It is very important to have it. There will be plenty of shocks, plenty of bad experiences.

**Interviewer: Flexibility?**

**Hjörtur:** Of course, yes. Again, you will go through a lot of different things, especially if you are going to very different countries. For example, if I am going to Denmark from here, then it is not a big change for me, but flexibility of course comes in handy. But if you go to Ghana or Lithuania, then of course, you need to be flexible, because things will not be the way that you want.

**Interviewer: What about patience?**

**Hjörtur:** Of course, you need to have a lot of it. Especially in countries like Ghana, when everything moves so slowly, you are asking for something, and you get the answer 'Tomorrow'.

**Interviewer: Is Ghana a slow country?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, Ghana is a very slow country. Everything happens very slowly. I mean, in Lithuania also. As I said, the chain of command in a company is slow working. It takes time to get things done, if you need some simple things, like a new computer, you need to go through some proper channels, it takes time.

**Interviewer: Do you need to have a sense of humor?**

**Hjörtur:** Yes, I would say that. Because there would be some embarrassing moments when it is good to know how simple to laugh from them.

**Interviewer: What about curiosity?**

**Hjörtur:** Of course, I mean, it's one of the things you must have to go to work somewhere else, it is curiosity. If you do not have that, then I'm guessing that you would not go to work anywhere else.

**Interviewer: What are the possible ways of dealing with the problems that might come along? Is there a need for training, for example? Does a person need to have some information about the host country? Should an expatriate read about it?**

**Hjörtur:** Of course, you need to prepare for leaving.

**Interviewer: In what ways?**

**Hjörtur:** You, I mean, need to search for material, talk to people that were there before, if that is possible. If that is not possible, then you need to jump, to evaluate yourself if you are ready for the challenges or not.

**Interviewer: What do you think should there be any training on intercultural competence before people go abroad?**

**Hjörtur:** I'm sure it would help and it wouldn't hurt, but there are limits to how prepared you can be. I mean, no matter how much you read, there will always be things that will surprise you, both in good and bad ways. Of course, education is good, but not that important I think.

**Interviewer:** Can you give some advice for those going abroad on how to deal with the problems resulting from a lack of intercultural competence?

**Hjörtur:** I mean, as we talked throughout, be open-minded and try if you can, of course, it might be good to have some security net, if you know somebody there, that you would have your way out if things don't work, don't burn all your bridges if the things don't work out. But mainly go for it and try. It's a great experience, not only working experience, but for life as well.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

Interview with Gunnar Jónsson on 7 April 2009.

**Interviewer:** You worked in China, didn't you?

**Gunnar:** Yes, I went to China in October 2001 and I came back in March 2003.

**Interviewer:** It was different from Iceland, wasn't it?

**Gunnar:** Yes, a lot.

**Interviewer:** This is exactly what I need to know. Let's start with whether there were any problems in adjusting yourself there? I mean, for example, those related to a different culture?

**Gunnar:** I lived in a very good apartment hotel. Thus the facilities for us who were there for inspection of shipyard were good. I was in China to inspect the building of a new oil ship. I was there almost from beginning when they started building a ship until the end in February 2003. And then I went home by this new ship. When I came to China, I enjoyed really good facilities as I have mentioned before.

**Interviewer:** What was most difficult?

**Gunnar:** The first problem that came up was that I had never eaten with chopsticks.

**Interviewer:** Was a fork and a knife an option?

**Gunnar:** No. Well, I mean, you could ask for them at certain places. And at some places the waiters would watch you trying to eat with chopsticks and then they would come and offer you a fork. Anyway, we used to go out for meal with other people very



often. And at the workplace we would eat at the canteen. The inspectors had their own place for eating but we were served the same food as everybody else.

**Interviewer: Were they foreigners?**

**Gunnar:** Yes, foreigners had their own place to eat but they had the same menu. In the evenings we usually went out for a meal. It took me approximately a week to get used to the chopsticks. Another thing was that I had to ask a Chinese to go for a meal with me, because the menu was never in a language apart from Chinese.

**Interviewer: Does it mean the language was a problem as well?**

**Gunnar:** Yes, no doubt. When I went out for a meal, I used to borrow a menu card from another inspector who had already translated it. So I could order from it. Later on, when I found out what was right for me, I always asked the waiter to put down the name for me in Chinese. That way I compiled my own menu so I could tell the waiter what I wanted. But when I was starting my life there, I found it pretty strange. For example, we used to go out for a meal, like four or five of us or sometimes more, but each time the order included about ten dishes. And then everybody was eating the same things. There was this round table and the dishes were there. I never knew what food was on these plates, and when I asked what that was, the answer would be 'Don't ask, just eat'. Nevertheless I had no stomach problems caused by the food. Not even once. I was never sick. I stayed there for one and a half year and this never happened. Basically, the food was good and eventually I learned what I was eating. We found food and customs around very much different. As I said, we went sometimes out for a meal to a place that was not exactly fancy, but nevertheless they served good food. Sometimes we went to some very posh places to eat, and you could see your food still alive somewhere. And then you would just point at something that you wanted to eat.

**Interviewer: At least you knew that the food you are eating is fresh.**

**Gunnar:** It was always fresh. I remember well one particular occasion. We went to the well-known place for a meal. There was this live corner, where everything was in the cages or some other place, and then you could see pictures what that would look like when you got it served. The waiter would come to the table, and then you would go with him and show him what you wanted to eat. I was looking around, and then I saw one cage, something was moving there and it was a snake. I ordered it and it was really good. It is usual for them, though it was really different for me. Another thing was a huge variety of living standard. I lived in Shanghai and sometimes I had to go to

other cities or towns to look for some parts for the ship. Shanghai and Beijing are very international cities. They have beautiful buildings and breathtaking skyscrapers, which are more beautiful than the ones you can see in Europe. However, just around the corner you could face poverty as well. Maybe just in the next street there are these old houses that are about to be pulled down because of renovation of the city. Sometimes it felt like you live in two absolutely different worlds: on one side there is this wonderful international environment, and on the other – China as it used to be years ago. Another inspector and I used to walk around those regions, but I never felt as if I was in any danger.

**Interviewer: Not even in the poor regions?**

**Gunnar:** No. Somehow I never felt in danger, everyone was nice, everyone was curious about us.

**Interviewer: Of course, you are white and tall.**

**Gunnar:** And very big. Everyone was trying to talk Chinese to us in. As I said, the difference in living standards was enormous. For example, in those old regions people lived in those old ugly houses, usually with one central kitchen for some houses. I noticed that every morning their pillows and other things were hanging outside on bamboo's trees or somewhere else, because it was very wet in the houses. But everything was really clean. I thought it was strange how clean everything was, including people. It was a surprise for us as things around were really old. This was the biggest difference of this community. Anyway, it was a very exciting experience. I went to work there rather than just touring the country. As I have mentioned before, we lived a good life. I was staying at my colleague's house, which was richer, and it was a very beautiful home, everything very clean. I liked it.

**Interviewer: Did you experience any cultural shock?**

**Gunnar:** No, not really. The first two weeks, maybe the first month were difficult, because I had come over half of the world, and I could only rely on myself. But as I have mentioned before, my housing there was no worse than the one I lived in Iceland. I felt no cultural shock. It was just difficult for me to see the poverty at other places outside Shanghai and even in some regions in Shanghai. That was terrible but there was nothing I could do. I just saw it; I saw that people lived in different conditions. One of the worst experiences while there was first Christmas.

**Interviewer: How do they celebrate Christmas?**

**Gunnar:** There is no Christmas there. It is not their religion. However, commerce has already introduced Christmas. They put Santa Claus outside; decorate shops, although they don't really know what Christmas actually is. Christmas days are regular working days in China. And the New Year comes in February. It is celebration time and they have a one-week holiday then.

**Interviewer:** Did you find working at Christmas time hard?

**Gunnar:** That was a bit difficult. But Chinese people were usually very nice. I never had problems working with them. It was never difficult.

**Interviewer:** What about body language? Do they touch a lot? Is their space orientation different from ours? Do they come very close when they talk?

**Gunnar:** They do come close. Sometimes I needed more space, but not always. They are very curious. I learned some words in Chinese, but the language is very difficult. I did not succeed to master it, but I learned some sentences. If I started talking to one or two of them, a few seconds later I was surrounded by ten others. They needed to know what was going on. The exchange of information was very efficient there.

**Interviewer:** Was that among people on the same hierarchy level or among the hierarchy levels as well?

**Gunnar:** All the time they tried to persuade that there were no obvious hierarchy levels there, but I don't think that was true.

**Interviewer:** Was the boss someone who employees from lower levels could not talk to?

**Gunnar:** No, not really. There are a lot of bosses there. There are no rather obvious levels of management. For example, the manager of the technical department had a lot of people in his department. However, he usually rode a bicycle to work. He had a company car but he preferred using a bike. But again, there are a lot of bosses above him. For example, we never saw the CEO of the company. I saw him once, during the Chinese New Year celebration. So I believe that levels of hierarchy do exist there and they are much stricter defined than for example here in Iceland.

**Interviewer:** Is the work environment more individualistic or collectivistic?

**Gunnar:** No, a Chinese is never works alone. Ten or twenty of them always work together.

**Interviewer:** Was it also something unexpected?

**Gunnar:** Yes, I think so. There are so many of them. There was one central station in

Beijing that was in charge of all shipbuilding companies. They employed a lot of people for very little money; people had to work much more hours than we would ever agree on. It is good that you asked about it as there was another thing that surprised me a lot. There are a lot of women doing all kinds of jobs. It seemed that there is almost no different between the sexes. For example, women also worked at the quality control department. Women usually operated cranes. Technicians were also both men and women. In China women have the same opportunities as men. Another thing that came as a surprise for us was when we were under the pressure to complete some specific job and we were working long hours. Other employees, who were very low-paid, were also doing the same. They were almost not paid for that. At night when there was no bus service, they still worked and they had to take taxis home. When we asked them why they worked such long hours and maybe spent all their pay they received for the long hours on a taxi home, they would answer: 'The company needs me'. And it was much more important than the pay. I've never heard anything like that before. Another thing was that they didn't speak nor write English well. A technician speaks English, but an ordinary Chinese person on the street doesn't speak English at all. Those who had to talk to us, they had to speak English. I don't know whether this was a misunderstanding, but none of them had bosses. All of them were bosses at that time. They always used the word 'leader'. The German inspector that was on the scene with us always corrected them not to use it. He said that Germans had very bad experience of leaders.

**Interviewer: Did you get any negative attention because of being white or tall?**

**Gunnar:** Only positive.

**Interviewer: I want to ask you about personality traits, what is required to survive in a completely different place. What is your opinion? Does a person need to be open-minded, ready to accept a challenge or stress?**

**Gunnar:** I think that it is very difficult to live and work there. We had some advantages. I was working for a foreign company. They knew they had to speak some other language to me than Chinese. But basically, I think it would be very difficult to go and live there. They are never happy to talk another language than Chinese.

**Interviewer: And generally, what traits does a person need to be able to live and work abroad? Is it necessary to be flexible?**

**Gunnar:** Yes. First of all, a person needs to have some kind of package. What I mean

is that there must be something to offer. People should never go to work abroad if they don't know how to sell themselves. It means that it is vital to have a positive attitude. Optimism is very important. On the other hand, that is a very exciting experience and in my opinion everyone, who has an opportunity to do that, should do that. However, not everyone has this opportunity. Sometimes people don't have the right educational background; maybe they are not open-minded. You always leave something behind and you have to adapt to the new environment. You can't change the host country. However, they may try to change you. And you should be ready for that.

**Interviewer: What is the best way to deal with the problems that might come up in a host country?**

**Gunnar:** My experience showed that the best way is to show respect to the people. I never talked down to them, and everyone was ready to help. You should simply show respect and be polite, and behave the same way you would like them to behave.

**Interviewer: Is it necessary to read about the country before you go there?**

**Gunnar:** Yes, very good that you mentioned that. The person who I worked with most of the time was very interested in the history and culture of the country he was working in. It was easy for me. I asked him and learned the most important facts about the history of China. And if I could tell them some facts or I knew where some city was or why it was famous, they were very happy. We showed them that we were interested in their culture.

**Interviewer: And the last question. Can you give some advice for those who are going to work abroad? How to be interculturally competent?**

**Gunnar:** As I said before, the way of thinking is important. Think: I am smart, I have something to offer, I can sell myself. It is necessary to have at least some knowledge of the host country, to know the main facts, so that you could talk to the people. I think this matters a lot.

**Interviewer: I think that is about all. Thank you very much.**

Interview with Goda Sabaliauskaite on 9 April 2009

**Interviewer: What is your previous work experience abroad?**

**Goda:** I lived and worked in North England for some years.

**Interviewer: Did you have any problems adapting there?**

**Goda:** Oh, yes. We don't use so many words to express our feelings. Or use the same word that could mean both positive and negative things. For example, you can say that something is *crazy* in a good way or a bad way. So it differs in what context you use which words. Another thing that many people from post Soviet countries have to deal with is lack of polite words in a conversation. We don't use as many *thank you's*, and as many *here you are's* as people do in England. Also the chitchat, I mean, talking about nothing, that English people are very well known for. Also queuing, English people can queue for hours without any signs of despair, they seem to like that. Then, of course, there were problems with understanding local working times. Let's say, working hours at some public institutions, banks and post offices. Of course, I had to adjust to driving on another side of the road. Although I don't drive myself, but I'm used to looking at one side of the street while crossing, so I had to get used to looking at the other side which was kind of a strange thing at first.

**Interviewer:** Did you face any problems while staying there? Did you face a cultural shock?

**Goda:** Oh, yes, definitely. Usually people from post Soviet countries are more straight-forward, they answer when they are asked. And English people tend to keep some of their opinions to themselves and remain polite to the very end.

**Interviewer:** As far as I understand, then the non-verbal communication is a big deal, right?

**Goda:** Yes, plus the cultural shock. They apologize even if you bump into someone. It's also culturally strange for us.

**Interviewer:** Any differences in body language? Do they come too close when they are talking? Do they touch too much?

**Goda:** I wouldn't say that. However, they like hugs and cuddles when you are feeling upset which our people are not so fond of usually. It gets time to get used to, but it depends on education as well. People from upper-middle class would never try to hug you, while people from lower middle class would do that all the time. They see that you are upset and they would ask if you would like to cuddle. And you are not allowed to say no, because it is rude. However, they respect personal space more, for example, in buses and underground.

**Interviewer:** Was there any diversity at your workplace?

**Goda:** Oh, yes, definitely. Although I lived in the north, where diversity is not as big

as in London, which is obviously the capital city. I lived near to Scotland and we had more of white brad British down there. It was strange that race didn't define nationality. You can meet a person of Indian or Pakistani race but they are pure British, because they have lived there for four of five generations. As England was always a colonial country, the variety of people is quite big. I lived in a district where we had mostly Muslim people. We had their shops there as well. Yes, you can feel diversity in every step of the way.

**Interviewer: What about the power distance at the workplace? I mean, do you know who the boss is? And is the boss someone untouchable; someone you cannot talk to because the superior position?**

**Goda:** No, I wouldn't say that. It depends a lot on the company's policy. Now I remembered. We had a girl that was a Muslim and she was wearing all the gear, you know. I don't know the name for it, but she had covered mouth and hair. At first it was a little bit strange for me only to be able to see a person's eyes, but they have rules that of you wear something due to religion you are allowed to wear it whether your position involves wearing a uniform or not. So that was strange but then we got used to it.

**Interviewer: Clothing then was not an issue?**

**Goda:** No, not really. Only religious clothing was a little bit differential.

**Interviewer: When you were working there, did you find the workplace environment rather individualistic or collectivistic?**

**Goda:** Depends on the workplace. When I worked at a hotel, then it was much more of a team work. Everything was on a chain reaction. Everybody had to understand each other from a sign language sometimes, because you cannot say everything to the guests. I remember some Polish colleagues having real problems with that because they wouldn't understand what they are required to do and they couldn't understand the body language that well. Another thing that was interesting when I went first to England was that when we studied at school we had the stereotype of a British person. It had to be a thin tall man under the umbrella with a long coat usually. And that is absolute nonsense because they wear next to nothing even when it is freezing outside. They wouldn't put a coat or anything, bare-legged, bare-armed in short T-shirts and not exceptionally thin people and they are not very quiet all the time. They have quite a big mouth, especially in the north.

**Interviewer: Was your nationality a problem?**

**Goda:** No, not a first. I started feeling that it was a problem about four or five months ago with the beginning of the recession processes. Some British started blaming on new European Union member country immigrants as the unemployment was getting higher and higher, so some British couldn't get the jobs and they were blaming immigration about.

**Interviewer: Let's talk about some traits that are required for intercultural competence. Do you think that open-mindedness is a trait that you need to have?**

**Goda:** Yes, of course you need to have open-mind if you want to experience the culture to the fullest.

**Interviewer: What about emotional stability?**

**Goda:** Oh, definitely, because wherever you go sometimes you feel you miss your family, you miss your friends, you miss even talking in your own language and eating your own food. I remember once my mom called me and she said she was eating some meat that I couldn't get and I started crying. I think this was an emotional instability moment.

**Interviewer: And curiosity?**

**Goda:** I think that curiosity and open-mind go together. Another thing that I remember is that I've never seen so many young moms with babies. Every second person I met there was carrying a buggy which I found nice.

**Interviewer: What is the best way to deal with the problems that might come up? Is there a need for training or should you read about the country?**

**Goda:** Yes, of course. One of the things I read before I came to England was the Embassy page and it had a lot of good advice. You never know what could happen if you lose your home or something like that. Another thing is the counseling system. You should need to know what you must do if you have some legal matter. Yes, there are a lot of things that you need to find out beforehand.

**Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions for those who are going abroad? What is the best way to deal with the problems arising because of a lack of intercultural competence?**

**Goda:** I think this is not because of knowledge. I think this is more because of all the characteristics you mentioned earlier. If a person can think quick, can use internet, can make friends easy, in any country he will be fine. At least compared to people who



don't have social abilities, who are a bit shy, who don't know anything about technologies. I don't think this is about the language. Some people can speak perfect English and still don't find anything.

**Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time.**

Interview with Herbert Pedersen, on 10 April, 2009

**Interviewer: When did you work abroad and where? I mean, what is your previous experience?**

**Herbert:** Well, the work experience is basically what I am doing right now.

**Interviewer: What country are you working with?**

**Herbert:** England.

**Interviewer: Have you lived abroad?**

**Herbert:** I have lived in Florida for five years.

**Interviewer: Where there any problems adjusting there?**

**Herbert:** No, there were no problems adjusting to life in America actually.

**Interviewer: Where there any problems staying there? Did you get a cultural shock?**

**Herbert:** I think I got more culture shock coming back here to Iceland than having a culture shock in the States.

**Interviewer: It is called a reverse cultural shock.**

**Herbert:** Yes, I got a reverse cultural shock. In the States it doesn't matter how you dress, or who you are, or what you do, I mean, everybody fits in. It is a huge melting pot and somehow the whole thing works. You deal with people from all over the world, different cultures and religions, and it is not a problem, but when you come here, everything is with one color, everything is the same. Somehow that was more uncomfortable than being in the States. It took a little time to adjust in Iceland.

**Interviewer: Where there any differences in the body language that you noticed while you were in the States?**

**Herbert:** No, not that I noticed.

**Interviewer: What about different religions?**

**Herbert:** No, I didn't have any problems.

**Interviewer: What about your current job?**

**Herbert:** Well, I'm dealing with people from England, Denmark and Lithuania, and I really don't see any problems. Everything flows.

**Interviewer:** What about punctuality? Do you think it is cultural?

**Herbert:** No, I don't think this is cultural. I would say it is more individualistic characteristics.

**Interviewer:** At your current job, do you find any problems in space orientation? Do people from other cultures come too close or touch too much?

**Herbert:** No. I mean, this is a fancy workplace and people dress up. There is a certain dress code there. People do not wear jeans or T-shirts or sweaters. And the women dress very elegantly. But I haven't noticed any space orientation, nothing like that.

**Interviewer:** Dress code that you mentioned, do you think this is because you are doing business with rich people?

**Herbert:** Yes, just in case if someone important comes in.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about the traits required for intercultural competence. Do you think a person should be open-minded?

**Herbert:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** What about emotional stability?

**Herbert:** I think emotional stability is always important.

**Interviewer:** What about flexibility?

**Herbert:** I think you should always show open-mindedness, flexibility when you are dealing with people from other countries. You have to meet somewhere in the middle I would think. I mean, I find this very easy.

**Interviewer:** What about curiosity?

**Herbert:** I don't know if this trait is needed but it would be easier for the person who is curious. He would adjust more, he would understand more. I don't think this is a necessity, but definitely would help.

**Interviewer:** What are the ways of dealing with the problems? Is there a need for training? Should a person read about a country or find some information?

**Herbert:** All of those things. We were talking about curiosity. I mean, you are in a foreign country and you don't know what the customs are. Should you shake hands or should you lean? Yes, I mean, you should do all of those things and be curious about how intercultural customs are in that culture.

**Interviewer:** Could you give any advice to those who are going abroad on how to

**deal with the problems arising because of a lack of the intercultural competence?**

**Herbert:** Well, it is fun to work with different cultures but I mean I'm curious about these things.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

Interview with Sandra Bruneikaite on 18 April 2009

**Interviewer:** Tell me about your previous cross-cultural experience.

**Sandra:** I mostly worked in Iceland. When I worked at a student organization I had to work with different nationalities. As I am Lithuanian, Icelanders are foreigners for me as well. I found it different working with them. When I worked at AIESEC I was dealing with people from Romania, Check Republic. For example, at the conferences there were people from as many as 80 different countries and sometimes I could notice certain cultural differences there.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any problems adjusting to those different nationalities?

**Sandra:** Those were not really problems as such rather they were the differences I noticed. For example, when I was working with the Romanians, I noticed that they were very hard working. I would say that they even had a quite aggressive attitude towards work. I know that even Icelanders were not very happy about their pressure. Icelanders, on the other hand, have their attitude 'it will all work out'. They usually wait until the last minute, and then somehow everything works out. But as far as I know, many expatriates in Iceland get some kind of cultural shock on how the Icelanders work, that they are too relaxed and do nothing. When I worked with some people from Check Republic, I considered their way of working very similar to Lithuanian. They were hard-working, attentive and never waited until the last minute to get the things done.

**Interviewer:** Did you have problems with the language at any time?

**Sandra:** No, not really. I used my English most of the time. When I started working in Iceland, it did not take much time to learn Icelandic, so the language was no problem. Maybe it was uncomfortable at the beginning, but I did not cause any big problems.

**Interviewer:** What about the body language? Did it ever happen that someone was too touchy or came too close and did not care about the space distance?

**Sandra:** Of course. I cannot remember exactly what nationality it was, but it happened more than once that I had to back away because of the distance between me and the person I was talking to was too small and uncomfortable.

**Interviewer:** What about religion? Did you have any problems working with people of other religions?

**Sandra:** No.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about the diversity at the workplace. What about the power distance? Did you find that the boss is someone who you are not allowed to talk to or touch or something like that?

**Sandra:** No, not really, especially not in Iceland. I thought that hierarchy in Iceland barely exists, both at university and at work you address everyone in the first person and use the first name; you can talk about almost everything. It was a big difference for me when I moved from Lithuania. I was used to living in a country where hierarchy exists.

**Interviewer:** What about masculinity/femininity? Say in Iceland, did you find the workplace background more feminine or masculine?

**Sandra:** Iceland is definitely a feminine society. It was strange at first. I mean, when I moved from Lithuania. Now I live in Holland and it is strange for me again because Holland is a much more masculine society than I thought. Iceland is a feminine country just like all other Scandinavian countries.

**Interviewer:** You said that Holland is a masculine society? What do you mean?

**Sandra:** Well, for example after a maternity leave women usually sacrifice their career and work only part-time, because there are not enough kindergartens and it is also very expensive. In general, in Iceland men more often take time off work after the birth of a child than here in Holland.

**Interviewer:** What about time? I mean, monochronic/polychronic time? In your opinion, do people come to work when they want and leave when they want? What about punctuality?

**Sandra:** There was no shock for me at first but I notice that I have changed after living in Iceland and am always late for at least five minutes, it is very true. As I mentioned before Icelanders are very relaxed. Of course, a society works on a time frame, however, this relaxation is sometimes annoying.

**Interviewer:** What about clothing? Did you find it different?

**Sandra:** At the workplace? Yes, a little. I worked in a bank in Iceland. If I compared it to my home country, I would say that in Lithuania people wear more formal clothes. Sometimes I thought that at least the managers could be more elegant.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk a little about the traits of character required to be interculturally competent. Does a person need to be open-minded?

**Sandra:** Of course, very much. When you go to a foreign country to study or to work, especially to work, you need to have an open-mind and to be flexible. It is because people communicate differently, have different norms and standards. You need to learn different ethics and to understand what is required from you. For example, I have already forgotten what it was like when I first came to Iceland as I had already adapted there and everything seemed to be the way it should be. But now I am in Holland and I am going to look for a job here, I talk to people and I find out that there will be some new things to learn like not to be judgmental and take people the way they are.

**Interviewer:** What about social-initiative?

**Sandra:** Oh, yes, I think, it is very important. I think I am social-initiative. When I work, it is very important for me to trust people I am working with even if I do not know them, I mean, I know them only as colleagues but not as personalities; it would be very difficult for me to delegate my assignments to somebody else, to share them. It is very important for me to know the people in order to work productively.

**Interviewer:** What about the emotional stability?

**Sandra:** Yes, of course it is important especially when you work in international arenas, even in your own country. When you work in a foreign environment, there are much more stress situations and there is a need to learn to react to them with an open mind and flexibility and to learn to understand what is needed. But a person needs to have emotional stability in order to react calmly and without stress.

**Interviewer:** Flexibility?

**Sandra:** Oh yes, of course. Again, as I have already mentioned, you need to adapt more quickly, to learn to deal with stress.

**Interviewer:** Patience?

**Sandra:** Patience? Of course. All of the characteristic you have mentioned could help to be interculturally competent.

**Interviewer:** Humor?

**Sandra:** Yes, a sense of humor is also important. Sometimes you just need to learn to make fun of something being said. It might seem offensive to you, but it could be just a misunderstanding caused by the cultural differences.

**Interviewer: Curiosity?**

**Sandra:** Curiosity is very important, especially if you want to make a career somewhere. In general, these days you cannot achieve anything if you are not curious enough.

**Interviewer: Ability to deal with stress?**

**Sandra:** Of course, it is very important.

**Interviewer: What is your opinion, what are the best ways of dealing with the problems? Is there a need for some training before moving to a foreign country, reading about the host country or getting some information about the country?**

**Sandra:** I think that preparation is vital even for those who have international experience. It might be not only cultures that differ, but there might be differences between the companies. There is a need to know the basic rules on how people communicate and the ethical norms. If you are prepared, then you know the mentality of the people, what to expect and how to react.

**Interviewer: What kind of preparation are you talking about?**

**Sandra:** You need to read about the host country in order to know something about it because then you can better communicate with the people and show initiative. It is easier to make friends when you can show that you know something about them. This always brings people closer. It is also good to take some training in cultural shock issues in order to be culturally prepared. For example, there may be some case study where you participate and take up challenges. This could open up your eyes and you will see that diversity may be very extensive. Yes, as I said, workshops, reading and things like that could help to be prepared.

**Interviewer: You've mentioned cultural shock; did you get any when you moved?**

**Sandra:** Of course, both in Iceland and here in Holland. You know, there are different types of cultural shock. You can get a cultural shock when travelling for a weekend only, for example, when you got to Italy and you see their traffic. When I moved to Iceland, I didn't notice the first stage of a cultural shock, but as time went by the later stages came. It was when I started worrying if I could live there, if I should stay there, would it be easy to make friends, to adapt in the country. Yes, I experienced culture

shocks, both stronger and weaker in different times. Of course, I survived. However, before going somewhere, it is very important to talk about the cultural shock and that is a very common process which a lot of people go through in order not to get really scared when it strikes and you don't know what is going on.

**Interviewer: And the last question, what advice would you give to those going abroad on how to deal with the problems resulting from a lack of intercultural competence?**

**Sandra:** Based on my own experience, the things that helped me most to adapt in the Icelandic society and I hope will help me to adapt in the Dutch society are finding out as much as possible about the country you are going to. If possible, you should acquire at least some basic skills of the language at least start learning the language upon arrival, be initiative, show that you like it there and that you are interested in them. This could accelerate the adaptation process and help to make friends. Adaptation is very important if you want to feel well in a foreign country. It is easier to become a competent communicator if you show interest in the country, the language and the people.

**Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time.**

