

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS A CORE SKILL IN THE GLOBAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: INTERNATIONAL AND MOLDOVA CASE STUDIES

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Abstract: In the era of globalization and the Republic of Moldova's efforts to integrate in EU and global environment, intercultural competence has become an essential capability that significantly influences leadership effectiveness, team performance, and organizational success. This paper examines the strategic importance of intercultural competence not just in business and management but also in education, by analyzing its theoretical foundations and practical implications. Furthermore, the paper explores the relationship between intercultural competence (IC) and cultural intelligence (CQ), emphasizing its role in fostering adaptability, trust-building, and innovation. Empirical evidence from international business contexts demonstrates that organizations investing in intercultural competence training achieve greater resilience and competitiveness in global markets. The findings from the international cases and the macro level studies in the Republic of Moldova analyzed suggest that intercultural competence should be recognized as a core component of managerial education and development, contributing both to individual leadership growth and to sustainable organizational performance.

This paper also proposes methodological suggestions for developing company case studies aimed at examining intercultural competence (IC) in organizational and managerial contexts. The proposed framework outlines strategies for selecting companies, gathering data, and assessing the managerial and organizational outcomes of IC initiatives.

Keywords: intercultural competence, international business, diversity, management, Moldova

JEL Classification: F23, M14, M16, Z13

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, globalization has transformed the landscape of business and management, creating unprecedented opportunities and challenges for organizations operating in multiple countries (Friedman, 2005; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). Companies and businesses are no longer confined to domestic markets; they increasingly engage in international trade, form global partnerships, and manage multicultural teams across geographically dispersed locations. This global expansion has made cultural diversity a defining feature of modern organizational life (Shenkar & Luo, 2008).

Cultural diversity in modern management refers not only to differences in nationality, language, and ethnicity but also to variations in values, interaction and communication styles, decision-making preferences, and social norms (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These differences can deeply affect managerial practices, including leadership, negotiation, teamwork, and strategic planning (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). Managers working in cross-cultural environments must navigate, understand and deal with potential misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and conflicts arising from cultural differences. Failure to recognize and adapt to these differences can result in decreased team cohesion, lower employee engagement, and reduced organizational performance (Earley & Ang, 2003).

Conversely, organizations that effectively manage cultural diversity gain a competitive advantage. Diverse teams bring varied perspectives, foster creativity and innovation, and enhance problem-solving by integrating multiple viewpoints (Stahl et al., 2010). As a result, the ability to operate successfully in culturally heterogeneous settings has become a critical managerial

competency. Intercultural competence - the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable effective interaction across cultures - is increasingly recognized as a strategic asset, essential for leadership, talent management, and sustainable organizational growth in the global economy (Deardorff, 2006).

Intercultural Competence in Management Research

Despite the clear benefits of cultural diversity, many organizations struggle to fully leverage it due to insufficient intercultural competence among managers and leaders (Ang et al., 2007; Rockstuhl et al., 2011). Intercultural competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to navigate cultural differences effectively, including awareness of one's own cultural biases, understanding of other cultural norms, and the ability to adapt communication and management strategies accordingly (Deardorff, 2006).

When managers lack these competencies, misunderstandings and conflicts often arise in multicultural teams (Hofstede et al., 2010). For example, differences in communication styles - such as direct versus indirect feedback, or high-context versus low-context messaging - can lead to misinterpretation of intentions and reduced collaboration (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst, 2003). Similarly, variations in decision-making preferences, power distance expectations, and approaches to hierarchy may create tension or slow down organizational processes (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). These challenges negatively impact team performance, employee satisfaction, and overall organizational effectiveness (Stahl et al., 2010).

Moreover, in the era where businesses increasingly operate in global networks, failure to develop intercultural competence can hinder international negotiations, partnerships, and market expansion (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Organizations and companies risk losing competitive advantage if leaders are unable to bridge cultural gaps and facilitate productive cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, addressing the lack of intercultural competence is critical not only for mitigating risks but also for maximizing the potential of multicultural teams, fostering innovation, and achieving sustainable organizational success (Ang et al., 2007; Deardorff, 2006).

Intercultural competence (IC) has been increasingly recognized as a critical factor influencing managerial effectiveness and organizational outcomes in diverse work environments. Research indicates that managers with high IC are better equipped to navigate cultural differences, reduce misunderstandings, and foster cohesive and productive teams (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007). By understanding both their own cultural assumptions and the values and behaviors of others, managers can adapt their leadership style to fit diverse contexts, enhancing employee engagement and motivation (Rockstuhl et al., 2011).

IC has also been linked to improved **team performance**. Culturally diverse teams often face challenges related to communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution due to cultural diversity (Stahl et al., 2010). Managers who use intercultural competence can mediate potential conflicts, facilitate effective collaboration, and leverage diverse perspectives to drive innovation and problem-solving (Deardorff, 2006). Empirical studies demonstrate that culturally competent leaders and managers contribute to higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and cohesion within multinational teams, leading to superior performance outcomes (Ang et al., 2007; Stahl et al., 2010).

Furthermore, IC is considered a **strategic asset** for global organizations. In international business contexts, managers have to engage in negotiations, partnerships, and cross-border projects where cultural misalignment can lead to financial losses or reputational risks (Hofstede et al., 2010; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Companies that invest in developing IC through mentoring, training programs, and experiential learning demonstrate increased adaptability, innovation, and overall competitiveness in international markets (Gonzalez, 2013; Deardorff, 2006).

Case Studies on the importance of Intercultural Competence

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The body of management research consistently demonstrates that intercultural competence is not merely a desirable trait but a fundamental requirement for effective leadership, team management, and organizational performance in multicultural and globalized business environments (Ang et al., 2007; Rockstuhl et al., 2011; Stahl et al., 2010).

Empirical and practical evidence highlights the critical role of intercultural competence (IC) in managerial effectiveness and organizational performance.

International cases

The following international case studies illustrate both the benefits of IC and the risks associated with its absence.

During Starbucks’ expansion into China, American managers initially faced challenges related to indirect communication and hierarchical decision-making norms common in Chinese business culture. By applying intercultural competence - understanding local consumer preferences, respecting business etiquette, and adapting marketing strategies - Starbucks successfully localized its offerings, including tea-based beverages, and built strong relationships with local partners (Moon, 2004). This case demonstrates how IC enables managers to navigate cultural differences and achieve sustainable growth in foreign markets.

The 1998 **merger between Germany’s Daimler-Benz and the U.S.-based Chrysler** highlighted the consequences of insufficient IC. Differences in decision-making styles, hierarchical expectations, and communication norms led to frequent misunderstandings, reduced morale, and operational inefficiencies. Ultimately, cultural misalignment contributed to the failure of the merger (Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1993). This example underscores the importance of IC in cross-cultural mergers and international management.

Google operates globally with diverse teams. Managers employ IC to facilitate effective communication, resolve conflicts, and harness diverse perspectives to drive innovation. Google’s IC-focused training and inclusive leadership practices have been linked to higher team performance and employee satisfaction (Ghemawat, 2011).

IKEA’s entry into India required managers to adapt product designs, store layouts, and marketing campaigns to align with local cultural norms. Intercultural competence enabled managers to negotiate successfully with local suppliers and meet consumer expectations, demonstrating IC’s role in market adaptation and organizational success (Bartlett & Beamish, 2018).

The international cases above enumerated, collectively demonstrate that IC is a strategic managerial capability. It mitigates misunderstandings, supports effective leadership, enhances team cohesion, and drives organizational performance in multicultural and global contexts. Organizations investing in IC development are better positioned to succeed in international business environments.

Case/studies in the Republic of Moldova

We searched, but we **couldn’t find** any full published company case studies in Moldova that explicitly treat intercultural competence (IC):

A case study of a *single company* in Moldova that explicitly designed, implemented, and evaluated an intercultural competence program (training / leadership development / cross-cultural teaming), showing before - after metrics (employee satisfaction, turnover, performance, international partnership success, etc.).

Detailed qualitative studies from within companies (interviews, observations) about cultural frictions (between ethnic groups, languages, local vs foreign management) and how those are managed or resolved.

Company-level financial performance data linked to IC practices (e.g. comparing companies with more inclusive, culturally aware cultures vs those without).

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What is available are several studies that come close or contain company - level data (especially in banking, surveys, organizational culture) from Moldova. We have summarised, in table 1, the most relevant ones, and note what data is lacking.

Table 1. Cases / Studies in or about Moldova

N r.	Title / Study	What it looks at / Findings	Relevance to IC & things we can draw from it
1.	Industrial Processing Companies in the Moldovan Agri-Food Sector: A Case Study (Ghencea & Stanciu, IBIMA, 2024)	Looks at small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in food processing: competitive situation, revenue growth, etc., using national statistics, etc.	This is more about economic/financial performance and industrial growth, not directly on intercultural competence. But sectors with foreign trading or export could have IC implications. It might serve as indirect evidence.
2	Change management: a case study in the Republic of Moldova through the prism of business efficiency (Şargu, Cobzari, Bivol, Ignat, Coca-Elena, 2021)	A local enterprise, particularly a large commercial bank, is studied for its organizational culture and how it handles change management; assessing effects on administrative/managerial efficiency.	Stronger relevance: banking is often multicultural (clients, staff, possibly foreign investment or partnerships). The study shows how organizational culture and change processes (which include elements of intercultural interaction) can improve efficiency. This can be used as a quasi-case of IC in practice
3.	Intercultural Profile of Managers in the Republic of Moldova (Pirlog, 2021)	Survey of managers in different sectors and students; uses Trompenaars-Hampden-Turner dimensions; identifies Moldova’s “national cultural profile” (e.g. particularism, individualism, neutral affect, status via achievement, etc.).	While it’s not a case of a single company, it gives good empirical baseline: how managers behave, perceive culture. This helps to understand what IC skills are more or less present in Moldova. Could be used to compare companies that deviate from the national norm.
4.	Intercultural “Diagnosis” of Management in the Republic of Moldova According to Geert Hofstede Model: Comparative Analysis (Pirlog, 2020)	Compares Moldova’s scores on Hofstede’s dimensions with those of key partner countries.	It provides macro / sectoral context. Useful to see how companies face cross-cultural interactions (imports, exports, foreign partners).
5.	The Dimensions of Corporate and National Culture: The Cross-National Analysis (Covas & Pirlog, 2019)	Compares corporate culture of companies in Moldova & Romania, and national culture dimensions.	Closer to company level. Could be used to extract cases of companies in Moldova whose internal culture practices illustrate IC or lack thereof, especially in comparison to similar companies

Source: Autor’s compilation

From the examples in table 1, we can deduce some practical management strategies or components of IC that are working or should be working in the Republic of Moldova:

- ✓ **Adopting foreign management practices** - subsidiaries of foreign companies bring formal processes, documentation, standardization; local firms that wish to engage in international business should either learn/adapt those practices or partner in ways that allow cross-cultural learning.

- ✓ **Change management and organizational culture development** - companies (especially banks) that actively manage change (in structure, communication, culture) are more likely to be effective. Managing resistance, ensuring leaders understand local culture (communication styles, hierarchy) helps during transitions.
- ✓ **Surveying internal values / perceptions** - the studies show that mapping what managers believe (their cultural orientation) helps companies design training, communication, and leadership development tailored to what is culturally realistic in a Moldovan context.
- ✓ **Foreign ownership / international customer base as drivers of IC** - companies like Moldcell or foreign-subidiaries set up in Moldova see the need to handle cross-cultural issues: different languages, customer expectations, parent company norms, etc. Management in these companies has to have cross-cultural awareness and adaptability.

Suggestions for Developing Company Case Studies

In order to strengthen the empirical foundation of intercultural management research in the Republic of Moldova, it is essential to develop well-structured company case studies. Such case studies provide valuable insights into how organizations apply intercultural competence (IC) in real business contexts and how these practices influence managerial effectiveness, teamwork, and overall performance.

Developing company case studies involves identifying firms with international exposure or diverse workforces, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, and documenting best practices, challenges, and outcomes. By focusing on local enterprises that collaborate with foreign partners, export goods, or employ multicultural teams, researchers can generate practical examples that connect theory with the realities of Moldovan business life:

Banking sector seems promising. The *change management* example suggests there are banks with some degree of managerial sophistication. Reaching out to large banks (Moldindconbank, Victoriabank, etc.) to see if their internal HR/OD departments have reports on cross-cultural issues (e.g. staff diversity, foreign investors, cross-boundary operations) could yield usable cases.

Telecommunications / telecoms (e.g. Moldcell, Orange Moldova) - they often have multinational ownership / partners, customer bases with linguistic diversity (Romanian/Moldovan, Russian, possibly Gagauz or other minorities). They might have case studies or internal reports about dealing with cultural differences in customer expectations, branding, communication.

Export-oriented SMEs in agri-food - the agri-food sector case study may contain subcases of companies dealing with standards, foreign clients, cross-border trade which likely force some intercultural adjustments.

Multinationals or foreign companies operating in Moldova - these are likely to have documented practices regarding IC (e.g. dealing with headquarters abroad, or managing multicultural teams). Checking annual reports, CSR reports, or contacting HR/communications departments could reveal informal or unpublished case material.

Developing medical tourism healthcare organizations (The Medical Tourism Association of Moldova, 2025) providing services to foreign patients, will have to apply to IC training programs enhance employees' skills. professionals trained in IC effectively navigate differences in communication styles, professional hierarchies, and patient expectations, improving team collaboration and patient outcomes (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

Structure of a Company Case Study on IC

To ensure that case studies exploring intercultural competence (IC) are both academically rigorous and practically relevant, a clear methodological framework is required. According to Yin (2018), well-designed case studies allow researchers to investigate complex real-life phenomena in depth and within their specific contexts - in this case, how Moldovan companies develop and apply intercultural competence in management practices.

1. Selection of Companies. The selection of companies should be guided by their exposure to international or multicultural environments. Yin (2018) and Stake (1995) recommend a **purposive sampling strategy**, focusing on organizations that provide rich information about the phenomenon of interest. In the Moldovan context, this might include enterprises engaged in export activities, international partnerships, or multinational subsidiaries (Pirlog, 2021). Including diverse sectors such as IT, hospitality, manufacturing, and education allows for broader applicability and comparative insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2. Data Collection Methods. Qualitative methods are central to case study research. As suggested by Flick (2014), researchers can employ **interviews, surveys, document analysis, and observation** to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of intercultural practices. Interviews with managers and employees help capture perceptions of cultural diversity and management adaptation (Deardorff, 2009), while surveys based on frameworks such as Hofstede’s cultural dimensions or the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) provide measurable indicators (Thomas&Inkson,2017). Document analysis - including HR manuals, training materials, and corporate communication - reveals how intercultural values are institutionalized within organizations (Brewster, Wood & Brookes, 2008).

3. Key Indicators for Measuring IC Impact. To assess the effectiveness of IC in organizations, case studies should focus on both **organizational** and **human** indicators. Thomas and Inkson (2017) suggest evaluating managerial adaptability, team coordination, and communication effectiveness. Quantitative metrics such as employee satisfaction, turnover rates, or client satisfaction can be used to demonstrate the business impact of intercultural programs (Brannen & Doz, 2010).

4. Structure of a Case Study Report The structure, as indicated in table 2, follows recommendations by Stake (1995) and Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014), who emphasize systematic data presentation and theory linkage to enhance analytical depth.

Table 2. A well-structured case study

Background of the company	Purpose of the study	Research methods and data sources	Findings and analysis	Discussion and implications
Sector, size, ownership, and international exposure	Intercultural challenge addressed	Interviews, surveys, observations	Linking empirical data to intercultural management theories	Organizational strategy and leadership development

Source: Stake (1995) and Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014)

5. Ethical Considerations. Case study research must respect confidentiality, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity. Deardorff (2009) warns against cultural stereotyping and promotes reflective, respectful research communication. Maintaining anonymity of participants and companies ensures ethical integrity and builds trust in the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusions

Intercultural competence (IC) has emerged as a critical capability for managers operating in globalized and culturally diverse environments. The evidence from theoretical frameworks and real-world cases demonstrates that IC enables managers to navigate cultural differences, mitigate conflicts, foster effective communication, and enhance team and organizational performance.

The findings from the case studies reinforce the theoretical frameworks of intercultural management and highlight the critical role of intercultural competence (IC) in achieving effective leadership and organizational performance. Starbucks’ success in China illustrates Hall’s (1976) high- and low-context communication theory: understanding implicit communication patterns and

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local business etiquette enabled managers to build trust and align marketing strategies with cultural expectations. Similarly, IKEA’s adaptation to the Indian market reflects Hofstede et al.’s (2010) cultural dimensions, such as power distance and collectivism, demonstrating the need to tailor organizational practices to cultural norms.

The Daimler-Chrysler merger exemplifies the risks of neglecting Trompenaars’ (2012) cultural dimensions, including differences in achievement versus ascription orientation and hierarchical expectations. Misalignment in these dimensions resulted in operational inefficiencies, low morale, and ultimately, organizational failure. Conversely, Google’s multicultural teams highlight how integrating IC into management practices promotes collaboration, innovation, and employee satisfaction, aligning with findings from the GLOBE project (House et al., 2004), which emphasizes culturally contingent leadership behaviors.

Organizations that invest in developing IC through training, mentoring, and experiential learning gain a strategic advantage by leveraging diversity for innovation and sustainable growth.

The examples under discussion underscore several practical implications. Managers in multicultural settings must develop self-awareness, cultural knowledge, and adaptive skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions successfully. Organizations should invest in IC training programs, mentoring, and experiential learning to enhance leaders’ capabilities. Theoretical implications include the validation of established cultural models (Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hall, GLOBE) in practical contexts, demonstrating their relevance for predicting managerial behavior and organizational outcomes in global environments.

IC is both a theoretical construct and a practical necessity. For global organizations, developing interculturally competent managers is essential for successful leadership, cohesive multicultural teams, and competitive advantage in increasingly interconnected markets. Future research should continue exploring the mechanisms by which IC influences organizational outcomes and the most effective methods for cultivating it in diverse managerial populations.

Our search, has shown that there is academic work (surveys, theses) exploring national culture, cultural dimensions, perceptions among managers in the Republic of Moldova, but hardly any public case study showing an explicit IC program in a for-profit Moldovan company with before/after data on organizational performance, employee satisfaction, turnover, etc.

Therefore, there is a clear need for empirical research and applied initiatives that systematically integrate intercultural competence (IC) development into managerial and organizational practices. Future studies should focus on designing, implementing, and assessing IC training programs in Moldovan enterprises, particularly those engaged in international partnerships or operating in culturally diverse markets. Such programs could serve as a foundation for improving leadership adaptability, communication across cultures, and overall competitiveness in the global economy.

While Moldova’s academic community has laid valuable theoretical groundwork, the next step involves transforming this knowledge into actionable strategies that enhance managerial effectiveness and organizational performance through intercultural competence. Strengthening this link between theory and practice will not only benefit individual companies but also contribute to the broader modernization and international integration of Moldova’s business environment.

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