

# **CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: STRATEGIC COMPETENCE FOR PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS**

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**Abstract:** The article investigates cultural intelligence (CQ – Cultural Intelligence) as an essential strategic competence in the context of globalization and increasing cultural diversity. The research analyzes how this skill contributes to career performance growth, facilitates effective adaptation in multicultural environments, and enhances chances of professional insertion. The aim of the study is to highlight the impact of CQ on professional performance, intercultural adaptability, and employability in the international labor market. A high level of CQ represents a competitive advantage for both professionals active in international companies and students preparing for a career in a multicultural environment. To achieve this objective, the methodology used is a mixed one: the theoretical analysis of specialized literature is complemented by case studies from the international business environment, as well as with qualitative information obtained from the experiences of students involved in academic mobility and intercultural activities. The article is structured into three major directions. The first part theoretically grounds the concept of cultural intelligence, explaining the four interdependent dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. It also makes a clear distinction between CQ and other forms of intelligence (emotional, social, cognitive, academic), given its specific nature of adapting to cultural differences in professional contexts. The second part of the study analyzes the impact of CQ on career, providing examples that demonstrate that employees with high levels of CQ adapt more quickly in multicultural environments, communicate more effectively, and achieve better results in international negotiations. Finally, it argues for the necessity of developing CQ in higher education and in continuing professional training. Some recommendations are formulated for universities, especially for the integration and development of CQ, the continuous training of teaching staff in the field of intercultural education, as well as for employers, who can leverage CQ in the processes of recruiting, selecting, and promoting staff. This multidimensional approach supports the idea that cultural intelligence is not just an advantage, but a strategic competence for professional success in international business.

**Keywords:** cultural intelligence, intercultural skills, professional adaptability, professional integration, university education, international business.

**JEL Classification:** M14, F23, J24

## **1 Introduction**

In recent decades, accelerated globalization and the cultural diversification of the labour market have significantly transformed the professional environment, necessitating a rethinking of the skills required for success in international business. In this context, cultural intelligence (CQ) has emerged as an essential strategic competency for perceiving cultural complexity and collaborating productively in multicultural environments. Thus, the ability to understand, interpret,

and adapt behaviours according to cultural context becomes indispensable for both individuals and organizations operating globally. Currently, intercultural interactions are increasingly frequent within international teams, in negotiation processes, and in cross-border business relations. In this regard, CQ facilitates the building of strong professional relationships, effective communication, and the reduction of intercultural conflicts, becoming a competitive advantage for professionals. Additionally, a high level of cultural intelligence is associated with better organizational adaptation, new performances, and a significant increase in employability.

The main purpose of the study is to analyse how cultural intelligence influences professional performance and employability, as well as the mechanisms by which it can be developed in educational and organizational contexts. The research combines theoretical foundations with an applied component, based on case studies from the international business environment, which allows for an understanding not only conceptual but also practical of the strategic value of CQ.

The article is structured into three chapters: the first explores the theoretical foundations of cultural intelligence; the second chapter analyses the impact of CQ on professional and academic performance in a globalized context; and the third highlights the role of education in developing intercultural competencies, with a focus on the training of students and teachers. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are made regarding the integration of CQ into educational and human resources policies, strengthening the training of human capital to adapt to an increasingly globalized professional world.

## **2 Cultural Intelligence: Theoretical Foundations, Dimensions and Explanatory Models**

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is an essential concept for professional success in international and multicultural environments, having significant importance in facilitating effective communication, negotiation, and adaptation in a globalized context. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical basis for cultural intelligence, explore its fundamental dimensions, and differentiate it from other forms of intelligence, highlighting relevant theoretical models that have contributed to the development of this concept. In general, cultural intelligence is defined as the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures. This involves not only knowledge of cultural differences but also the ability to adapt behaviours and strategies to successfully navigate various intercultural contexts. The first researchers to introduce this concept were Earley P. C. and Ang S., who defined CQ as "the ability to function effectively in a diverse cultural context where people from different cultures work, live, or interact" (Earley et al., 2003). At the same time, cultural intelligence is not limited to simply knowing a set of cultural norms and values, but involves a complex approach that integrates cultural awareness, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural skills.

To understand this concept better, it is important to address the four fundamental dimensions of CQ, proposed by Earley P. C. and Ang S. (Earley et al., 2003). These dimensions reflect various aspects of human behaviour that influence intercultural interactions, being essential for success in a globalized environment. The CQ dimensions are:

**The cognitive dimension** refers to the theoretical and intellectual knowledge about various cultures and how these influence human behaviours and values. It involves understanding cultural structures and norms, as well as how they affect social and professional interactions. For example, a person who knows that in Japanese culture there is a special emphasis on respect for authority will avoid being too direct in their interactions with Japanese colleagues.

**The motivational dimension** refers to a person's desire and openness to learn about different cultures and engage in intercultural interactions. In this sense, it is essential for individuals to be motivated to overcome cultural barriers and build relationships with people from other cultures. For example, a manager motivated to understand and integrate cultural diversity will actively seek to participate in international events or intercultural training sessions.

**The behavioural dimension** refers to an individual's abilities to adapt behaviourally according to the cultural context in which they are situated. This involves using appropriate strategies and behaviours in intercultural interactions. For example, a person from an individualistic culture, such as the American one, may adopt a different approach to negotiation compared to a person from a collectivist culture, such as the Chinese one, where group relationships are emphasized.

**The metacognitive dimension** refers to the ability to reflect on one's own cultural knowledge and skills, to adjust interaction strategies according to intercultural situations. This entails a critical awareness of one's understanding of cultures, a capacity to evaluate and adapt behaviours and approaches during intercultural interactions. For example, a team leader working in a multicultural context will constantly reflect on the communication styles of team members, adjusting leadership methods according to their cultural needs and expectations. Through its specific character of adapting to cultural diversity, cultural intelligence differs from other forms of intelligence, such as emotional, social, cognitive, and academic intelligence.

**Cultural intelligence vs. emotional intelligence.** While emotional intelligence (EQ) focuses on recognizing and managing one's own emotions and those of others, CQ involves understanding and adapting to the specific emotions and behaviours of other cultures.

**Cultural intelligence vs. social intelligence.** Social intelligence involves the ability to interact effectively in various social situations, but it does not guarantee adaptability to cultural differences. CQ is a higher level of social intelligence, encompassing not only effective interaction but also intercultural flexibility.

**Cultural intelligence vs. cognitive intelligence (IQ)** – Cognitive intelligence measures general intellectual abilities, the capacity to solve abstract problems, and is not directly correlated with intercultural skills.

**Cultural intelligence vs. academic intelligence.** Academic intelligence reflects analytical and cognitive skills applied in solving theoretical problems, but does not necessarily involve interpersonal skills or cultural adaptability. Therefore, cultural intelligence is a multidimensional concept that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social elements, being essential in international professional environments.

**The Sternberg model (1985) on practical intelligence.** Although it does not directly refer to CQ, this model suggests that success in intercultural interactions depends on practical adaptation skills, which is reflected in the principles of cultural intelligence (Sternberg, 1985).

**The Schwartz model (1992) on cultural values.** This model provides a perspective on how fundamental values influence intercultural interactions and the need for a flexible approach based on CQ (Schwartz, 1992).

**The Earley & Ang model (2003).** This model is based on the four dimensions of CQ and highlights the importance of integrating them for effective adaptation in diverse cultural environments (Earley et al., 2003).

**Thomas's model (2006).** It is another relevant model that emphasizes the role of motivation and intercultural awareness. Thomas argues that CQ is a learned skill that can be acquired and developed through experience and intercultural training. His model emphasizes that, in addition to cognitive knowledge, the motivation to understand and interact effectively in an intercultural context plays an essential role (Thomas, 2006).

**The Gelfand et al. model (2008) concerning culture and behavioural flexibility.** This theoretical framework emphasizes the role of cultural intelligence in developing behavioral adaptation mechanisms and resilience in multicultural contexts (Gelfand et al., 2008).

In summary, we state that these models contribute to understanding the complexity of cultural intelligence and its application in various fields such as international business, education, and diplomatic relations. Therefore, cultural intelligence represents an essential element for

professional success in the international arena, facilitating effective interactions between individuals from different cultures.

### **3 The impact of cultural intelligence (CQ) on professional and academic success in a globalized context**

Cultural intelligence (CQ) becomes a determining factor in the employability of professionals, facilitating collaboration in international teams, optimizing negotiations, and building sustainable business relationships. In what follows, we will analyse the impact of CQ on professional success, on one hand, and address cultural competencies, adaptability, influence in negotiations, and relevant case studies, on the other hand. Currently, multinational companies and international organizations favour the recruitment of individuals who, in addition to technical skills, also possess the ability to navigate diverse cultural environments, collaborate effectively with global teams, and demonstrate flexibility in work relationships. Therefore, cultural competencies include:

**awareness of cultural diversity** - understanding the norms, values, and specific practices of different cultures;

**behavioural flexibility** - adapting communication and interaction styles according to the cultural context;

**intercultural tolerance and empathy** - the ability to accept, respect, and understand cultural diversity without prejudice or mental barriers, promoting constructive collaboration;

**communication, negotiation, and networking skills** - using intercultural strategies to establish effective professional relationships.

There are studies that highlight the importance of diversity and cultural intelligence (CQ) in the recruitment process. For example, a study conducted by McKinsey & Company found that organizations with diverse executive teams outperformed their industry peers by 21% in terms of profitability. Additionally, the Boston Consulting Group discovered that companies with diverse management teams have revenues that are 19% higher. These data suggest that professionals with a high level of CQ are preferred in recruitment, as they contribute to organizational success through adaptability and effective management of multicultural relationships <https://bia.ro/diversitatea-in-recrutare/>.

In international business environments, where daily interactions involve significant differences in work styles, behaviours, and social norms, intercultural adaptability is essential. Organizations operating in the global space often face challenges related to:

**communication between multicultural teams** - for example, communication styles differ substantially between Western and Asian cultures;

**managing conflicts and cultural divergences** - differences in decision-making approaches can create tensions in heterogeneous teams;

**integrating professionals relocated to other countries** - they need to quickly adapt to new cultural environments.

Individuals with developed cultural intelligence demonstrate an increased ability to accurately interpret the behaviours and cultural norms of their interlocutors, avoiding communication barriers and effectively managing cultural divergences. This ability helps reduce conflicts and foster collaboration, providing a suitable atmosphere for professional efficiency. A concrete example is the IT and technology sector, where teams are made up of specialists from various corners of the world, collaborating on complex projects. Companies like Microsoft, Google, and IBM actively invest in CQ development programs, recognizing the significant benefits of intercultural adaptability: more effective collaboration and increased productivity. IBM and Microsoft are collaborating to accelerate digital transformations through hybrid cloud and AI strategies, which also involves developing intercultural competencies for global teams <https://www.ibm.com/microsoft>.

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Google invests in diversity and inclusion programs, promoting an organizational culture that values intercultural adaptability <https://patentpc.com/blog/big-techs-quantum-computing-investments-google-ibm-and-microsoft-by-the-numbers>.

Without an adequate understanding of cultural norms, negotiations can be compromised, and business relationships may suffer. Several studies in the field reveal that professionals with high CQ succeed in adapting negotiation strategies according to cultural norms, avoiding tensions and establishing strong business relationships. According to several authors who have studied the influence of culture on negotiations (Hofstede, 2010; Meyer, 2014; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997), the main relevant cultural differences that influence this complex process include:

**Relationship orientation vs. result orientation.** In Asian cultures (e.g., Japan, China), negotiations emphasize trust and long-term relationships, unlike American culture, which favours a direct approach and pragmatism.

**Communication style.** Some cultures (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands) prefer explicit and direct communication, while others (e.g., India, Brazil) favor diplomacy and indirect communication.

**Perception of time.** Negotiations in Western culture are fast and decision-oriented, while in Arab or Asian culture, the process is slower and based on protocol.

It is worth mentioning that in American culture, negotiations are results-oriented, with a direct and pragmatic approach, which requires clear and efficient communication. In Arab culture, respect and protocol are essential, and professionals who understand these nuances will have a better chance of achieving favourable agreements. Therefore, cultural intelligence allows professionals in international business to adjust their behaviours, negotiation styles, and optimize their negotiation strategies. Several multinational companies have implemented cultural intelligence training programs, recognizing the positive impact of CQ on employee performance and operational efficiency. In this regard, relevant examples of companies can serve the following:

**Google.** The company successfully integrates CQ courses for employees, facilitating effective collaboration in international teams and optimizing international projects. Furthermore, Google invests significantly in diversity and inclusion programs, including by providing training courses in cultural intelligence (<https://patentpc.com/blog/big-techs-quantum-computing-investments-google-ibm-and-microsoft-by-the-numbers>).

**Airbnb.** The company uses cultural intelligence strategies to adapt services according to the local culture and market, maximizing customer satisfaction and strengthening international partnerships.

**IKEA.** The company adjusts its global strategy according to the specifics of each region, applying CQ principles in expanding into diverse markets. IKEA maintains common core values across all markets, while adjusting elements such as products, services, and marketing to meet the needs and cultural preferences specific to each region. ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306323896\\_IKEA\\_Group\\_on\\_the\\_International\\_Stage](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306323896_IKEA_Group_on_the_International_Stage)).

The case studies presented: Google, Airbnb, IKEA, demonstrate that CQ is a strategic advantage for large corporations, and success in a competitive global environment increasingly depends on the ability to effectively manage cultural diversity. Currently, cultural intelligence (CQ) is recognized as an essential strategic competency, both in the corporate environment and in higher education institutions, having a significant impact on the professional success of graduates. The Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM) serves as a relevant example, being internationally recognized for the quality of its programs and included in the prestigious Eduniversal ranking (<https://ase.md/asem-in-clasamentul-international-eduniversal/>). In the World Economy and International Economic Relations study program, students are prepared to manage external economic activities and coordinate the internationalization processes of companies. The extensive professional training opportunities significantly contribute to their integration into the

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global labour market. According to information available on the official ASEM website, the EMREI program aims to train specialists in the field of world economy and international economic relations, capable of adapting to the demands and dynamic changes of the national and international economic environment. Graduates acquire skills in organizing and managing the external economic activities of companies, departmental or ministerial structures, as well as in coordinating the internationalization activities of domestic companies. They are trained in managing human, material, and financial resources within enterprises and institutions engaged in foreign activities, and in negotiating agreements and contracts with foreign partners (<https://smeeb.ase.md/studii-universitare-de-licenta-ciclul-i/>).

Moreover, academic mobility programs play a fundamental role in the development of cultural intelligence, providing students with the opportunity to interact with various educational and cultural environments. Among the initiatives contributing to this process are Erasmus+, the SUR-PLACE scholarship offered by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and other academic exchange projects. Participation in the **Erasmus+ program at the University of Liechtenstein** facilitates the development of intercultural and academic skills. The focus is on individual learning, autonomy in the educational process, and collaboration in international teams. The academic environment provides resources and constant support, fostering the deepening of knowledge and its applicability in various professional contexts. Mobility programs allow for interaction with different teaching methods, encourage the development of social skills, and provide access to diverse academic perspectives. Furthermore, practical activities contribute to reinforcing a balanced approach between theory and the applicability of economic concepts.

**The Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Sur-Place program** supports academic training and civic engagement through participation in seminars, conferences, and workshops focused on democracy, European integration, and the functioning of international institutions. These experiences enrich economic and political knowledge, facilitating the development of a broad vision of global dynamics. Additionally, within the program, civic projects are carried out, such as “I am young and I care,” which aim for direct interaction with young people and the promotion of civic values. Involvement in such initiatives contributes to the development of competencies in project management, teamwork, and public speaking, which are necessary for professional success. Therefore, the experiences gained from academic mobility programs and civic projects represent valuable opportunities for developing a global perspective and strengthening cultural intelligence, essential elements in the context of an international career.

In summary, it can be said that in the current context of globalization, cultural intelligence represents an essential criterion for integration into international teams, negotiating contracts, and strengthening sustainable professional relationships. Educational experiences and mobility programs, such as Erasmus+ or the Sur-Place scholarship, significantly contribute to the development of intercultural competencies, fostering openness, tolerance, and the acquisition of practical skills relevant to the global labour market. Case studies of companies such as Google, Airbnb, or IKEA demonstrate that effective management of cultural diversity constitutes a major competitive advantage, promoting innovation and success in an interconnected professional environment.

#### **4 University Education and the Development of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) for International Business**

In an international context characterized by cultural diversity and global interdependence, education plays an essential role in developing cultural intelligence, providing future specialists with the necessary tools to understand and successfully navigate cultural diversity. Next, we will analyse the integration of CQ in student training, the impact of educational modules, the development of teaching staff, as well as some perspectives for research in the field of cultural intelligence. Studies show that early exposure of students to multicultural contexts, through

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international mobility, intercultural projects, as well as simulations and case studies, significantly contributes to increasing CQ (Ng, Van Dyne & Ang, 2009). In the academic environment, the development of cultural intelligence can be achieved through:

- courses on intercultural communication, diversity, and global intercultural leadership;
- extracurricular activities (international clubs, partnerships with NGOs, multicultural events);
- international mobility programs (Erasmus+ or academic exchanges);
- experiential learning methods, such as role-playing, international business simulations, intercultural case studies.

The introduction of CQ in student training should be an integral part of a transdisciplinary curriculum that leverages cultural diversity as an educational and professional resource. It is important to mention that, for the integration of CQ into higher education, adequate training of teaching staff is necessary, as they play a fundamental role in shaping students' attitudes and values. Therefore, university professors must become facilitators of intercultural learning and promoters of diversity. The training of teaching staff in the field of cultural intelligence may include:

- continuing professional development programs** in intercultural education, designed to prepare them for teaching CQ in a practical and labour market-relevant way;

- innovative pedagogical methods**, such as project-based learning, interaction with international guests, and business simulations;

- thematic workshops** on integrating cultural diversity into the teaching process;

- international academic mobility**, which allows exposure to other educational systems and cultural models;

- exchanges of best practices** between universities and international institutions;

- the creation of educational modules** on intercultural leadership, international negotiation, and global team dynamics, which represent a concrete step toward systematizing intercultural training. These can be mandatory, optional, or part of training programs in management, communication, international relations, social sciences, or education. Cultural intelligence will continue to be an essential subject of study in globalized education, with direct implications for the preparation of future leaders and specialists. Therefore, research directions in education would target the following areas:

- CQ and academic success in international contexts** – analysing how students with high CQ achieve better results in intercultural collaboration and international projects;

- digitalization and intercultural learning** – developing CQ through online platforms, cross-border collaborative learning, and intercultural virtual classrooms within distance education.

In light of the above, it can be stated that cultural intelligence becomes an essential competence for professional success in international business, a strategic investment in preparing leaders capable of performing in an increasingly diverse and interconnected professional environment. University education plays a key role in shaping this.

### **5 Conclusions and Recommendations**

In a professional environment deeply influenced by globalization and economic interdependence, cultural intelligence (CQ) emerges as an essential strategic competence for success in international business. Unlike other forms of intelligence, CQ focuses on the ability to understand, interpret, and act effectively in different cultural contexts, facilitating collaboration, negotiation, and decision-making in multicultural teams. The development of CQ should begin as early as the university education stage, through an adapted curriculum, experiential learning methods, international mobility, and teacher training. Universities thus become key actors in preparing professionals for the global labour market. At the same time, organizations play a crucial role in supporting the continuous development of CQ through intercultural training programs, inclusion policies, and the assessment of intercultural competencies as part of professional performance. It is recommended that higher education institutions include CQ development in the

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mandatory curriculum structure, not just as an elective, either as part of foundational training in fields such as business, management, social sciences, education, or international relations. Universities should actively promote international mobility, intercultural projects, and applied learning experiences, which contribute to fostering a global mindset among students.

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