Raising the Awareness of the Benefits of Cultural Sensitivity Training within Organisations

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Abstract

Due to organisations across the globe increasingly employing multicultural workforces consisting of both local employees and expatriates, the objective of this research was to raise awareness of the perceived benefits of providing cultural sensitivity training. Evidence of proven benefits have been emphasised throughout the study showing that cultural sensitivity training provides numerous benefits to organisations in terms of profitability and improving employee satisfaction.

The results of the primary research conducted indicate that there is a need for multicultural organisations to provide more emphasis on cultural sensitivity training, identified by both the employees and directors of private and public organisations researched, following an analysis of behaviours, feelings and attitudes of research participants. Recommendations based on the results of this research have been posed to the organisations used in this study in order to achieve employee satisfaction, increased production and more effective team working. All of which suggests that providing such training could lead to organisations gaining a competitive advantage in investing in cultural sensitivity training with a strong competitive advantage as a result, as opposed to risking the gain by not providing it.

Key words: Culture and communication, cultural sensitivity training, global management, international business, international business and culture, training and development.
Introduction

The expansion of effective human resources organisational development strategies is a key factor of success in multicultural working and organisational globalisation. It may be seen as advantageous that organisations increasingly find the need to employ a multicultural workforce. This may be due to organisations expanding their company internationally or by increasing their knowledge base, developing talent and filling skills gaps within the workforce in order to have the best teams working together to achieve a competitive advantage.

Literature on the management of cultural diversity suggests that addressing cultural sensitivity issues can in fact create a competitive advantage. Cox and Blake (1991, p45) have suggested that: “a well-managed, diverse workforce holds potential competitive advantages for organisations”.

It is now commonplace that companies are sending their employees to work in international locations as expatriates, in industrial sectors such as healthcare, pharmaceutical and energy firms being the major industries for growth (The Telegraph, 2012); and also due to increasing the market reach of their products, and the demand of such products or services offered. Such situations may prove a challenge for the expatriate worker as they are required not only to operate effectively within the workplace in a different environment, but live their day to day lives harmoniously alongside and within another culture, which again results in employees from diverse cultures from across the globe joining together to work as part of a team in order to reach a mutual goal in a professional and social context. Although employee goals within the workplace are mutual, having different backgrounds, beliefs, personalities and ways of working may contribute to disagreement, conflict and misunderstandings between employees. This in turn could lead to some disruption in completing any given task which could result in decreases in productivity, unhappy and unmotivated staff, increased recruitment and selection costs due to staff members leaving, which would have a huge impact and may affect the company’s revenue. Therefore, one of the most challenging responsibilities a manager has to face is that of the successful effective operation, within a national or international mixed culture setting, as identified in the work of Park and Harrison (1993).

This paper will seek to categorise a pertinent literature review, in this research domain, into five different categories. Firstly it will seek to investigate literature on the different types of cultures around the world and how they are perceived. Secondly this paper will link relevant physiological theory to the cultural sensitivity scenario. Thirdly the paper will critique the literature on global management roles and responsibilities. Fourthly, it will look at the literature around cross-cultural communication and lastly the literature review will investigate research previously undertaken from a training perspective.

Cultural Types
One person’s reality is different from somebody else’s. Yes, you may perceive this with different personality types within one culture however, when you compare this across nations it’s on a much larger and more profound scale.

According to Lewis (2006), the many hundreds of world cultures can be simply classified into three different sectors: task orientated and highly organised known as Linear Active, the people orientated and talkative types known as Multi Active and the introverted, respectful listeners known as Reactive.

The term Liability of Foreignness interprets as costs associated with unfamiliar operating surroundings and differences in economy, administration and culture. In a managerial context this interpretation stretches to the management challenges of not only global coordination in terms of geographical distance but also to national multicultural organisations. Such factors can have adverse effects upon gaining a competitive advantage over rival firms as identified in Zaheer (1995), Okoro (2012), and Chaney and Martin (2011).

The development of management skills and intercultural competence might now be seen as an essential component of training, which would contribute to the success of national multicultural and global organisations (Okoro, 2012). This puts an even greater emphasis upon the responsibility of the global manager not only to manage successfully to obtain the necessary skills and expertise about world culture, not only for their employees but for their customers alike.

**Communication**

Failure to communicate effectively can lead to unwanted costs and long term damage of an organisation’s image and reputation (Cauwood 2009). Therefore cultural sensitivity training should also consider some aspects of local language and dialect training and support in order to improve team communication, which would be more aligned to the expatriates. According to Maurer (2013) from 202 surveys distributed to chief executive officers and human resource professionals in organisations, it was acknowledged that the most common approaches used in preparation prior to an overseas project was an overview of cultural differences and providing language training.

Culture is created by means of communication or ‘enculturation’, which is defined as “the process by which you learn the culture in which you are born” (DeVito 2014, p32), rather than from genetic variation, which determines skin colour, eye colour and the gender of a person. Communication may not necessarily solely lie with verbal means but may also be effective or judged by using eye contact and body language and body language includes use of personal space, etiquette, body contact, understanding the appropriate conduct between genders, posture, and personal appearance (Foster, 2000).
Training

Fowler (1999) found that the majority of employees who resign soon after joining an organisation do so because they have not been aided to either understand their role or to fully familiarise themselves with the organisation. He indicates that both aspects are central to effective induction into the workplace.

In terms of the multicultural nature of national and multinational corporations, in order to build cultural understanding and awareness into organisations Hofstede (cited in Higgs 1996) proposed a structure to build some competences which are needed for multicultural working as building awareness of own culture and of cultural differences, developing knowledge of the impact of cultural difference and of the strengths and weaknesses of different cultures in a managerial setting, building skills in identification of the impact of differing cultural settings for managerial problems, and adapting behaviours to achieve effective results in different cultural settings.

Such a framework of competences could be used to assist the building of effective cultural sensitivity training aimed towards the management teams. Research actually shows that the employees who took part in such training displayed increased accuracy of cultural perceptions, adapted stronger cross-cultural relationships and had improved their job performance, despite increased negativity from management (Park and Harrison, 1993) and Black and Mendenhall (cited in Park and Harrison, 1990). In Park and Harrison’s 1993 research, their intention was to introduce a conceptual framework for enhancing the efficacy of culture training, in which they identified that one of the most prevalent reasons that such training is considered ineffective by top management was due to a belief that good management skills are universal.

Many academics have suggested various interventions, self-tests and training methods for cultural sensitivity training. Earley and Peterson (2004, p103) describe existing approaches as “something of a cafeteria style of education, a bit of this and a bit of that in the hope that something will be useful”. They have based their description upon several approaches that were designed throughout the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s. When considering the scale of requirements of such training at this time and the size of globalisation and how much multicultural working is happening on a national scale, it could be argued that in the modern world today, there would be a great need to develop, update and enhance this particular type of training due to the huge increase in multicultural working across the globe.

Methodology of research conducted

Questionnaires were aimed at both management and non-management working in multicultural settings, to enhance the approach as to their understanding around cultural sensitivity training and to gain an insight into the global management perspective of this subject matter.
In relation to the questionnaire derived for primary research, additional qualitative approaches were taken throughout due to the nature of this study, which was specifically targeted at social aspects including feelings and scales of importance. A total of 57 questionnaires were returned out of a total of 100 distributed which equates to over half or a 57% return rate.

Semi structured interviews were used as part of this research in order to gain deeper insights into behaviours and attitudes. The researchers conducted 7 interviews of director grade staff in both public and private organisations. The interviews consisted of 7 basic questions. The questions focussed around whether or not the organisation provided cultural sensitivity training and if they did what the content of their programme was. Further questioning was around their awareness of implications of not providing such training between teams and for the organisations gaining competitive advantage.

Research Analysis

Extensive exploration of literature and primary research has enabled this research to gain an insight into the lives of employees working in multicultural situations and Organisational Directors’ views on this subject. The results do connect with the overall research aim as it seems the majority, even if employees stated that they were not culturally aware, actually do believe that cultural sensitivity training would benefit them as employees and believe it would also benefit production.

In terms of being culturally aware, primary research has indicated, in line with secondary data and research, that expatriates were found to claim that they were in fact culturally aware, which suggests that expatriates are learning more due to being surrounded personally and professionally by different culture types whereas locals are not necessarily exposed so much to other cultures in their personal lives. This however, does not eliminate the need for cultural sensitivity training within organisations, due to the negative responses from the local employees whom stated that such training should take place.

Having a well-managed diverse workforce plays a key role in organisations and results of this study have found that both senior global managers and executives agreed that the senior global manager role should contain a high level of cultural sensitivity knowledge in order to be successful in their role, and that this training be included as part of the organisations essential training programmes.

Secondary research has shown that an element of language training is appropriate for expatriates assigned to overseas projects in which the expatriate element of the primary research concurs. However, this research has found that organisations would benefit from incorporating strategies for both locals and expatriates, especially assisting local employees on how to overcome communicational issues with their overseas colleagues. This study has found that employees would find such training would benefit
them in their personal lives and therefore, sees this as the motivation required in order for them to attend such training.

Suggestions of which topics for cultural sensitivity training were identified as a result of primary research and the following most popular choices of topics were suggested for consideration:

- Generic understanding of different cultures
- Religious beliefs
- Cuisine and drinking rules and reasons
- Social habits
- Celebrations around birth, marriage and death
- Hierarchical behaviours
- Body language

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to raise awareness of the benefits of cultural sensitivity training and to do this the study used a range of multicultural organisations, one public sector and global private companies in order to carry out primary research. The public organisation chosen was a UK National Health Service organisation and the other being a random selection of multinational organisations with multicultural workforces.

Limitations were experienced in this research due to the lack of responses to the questionnaire, which resulted in more time and effort being required than was originally planned for. A further limitation was that the interview questions were restricted due to organisational directors not wanting to be tied up for too long and in order for them to agree to the interview. There were no further unexpected problems in conducting the research.

This research concludes by recommending that multicultural/multinational organisations, whether more national or international, should provide a training programme of cultural sensitivity as part of either the staff induction process or by including it as an element of their essential annual training. The content of which could in fact be aligned to whichever culture types were present within the workforce or a generic overview of world culture, by taking on board the suggestions posed in the research analysis section.

In terms of future research, extending the interviewee numbers and possibly directing the interviews at training managers of organisations as opposed to directors who may not necessarily be involved in the particular area of training and development, is an option for consideration.
The primary influence of this investigation was to extend the literature on the subject of cultural awareness. Its results can be used to encourage organisations to build specific training programmes, which would lead to efficiency in production and improved staff morale.
References


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