

Competencies required in the international business

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Abstract

The article aims to identify basic competencies that young graduates of language studies should develop in order to be successful in the international business corporation. Nowadays, a variety of vacancies are open to young people, on the condition that they fulfill particular requirements. To thrive in the world of international business today demands an entirely different set of skills than was expected even a decade ago. The rise of globalization together with international mergers and acquisitions have evoked certain behaviors and adjustments essential not only for experienced employees, but also for young graduates eager to get into the fascinating world of business. Multinational companies that hire international business professionals are looking to see if a person has what it takes to get the job done. Alongside meeting the educational and occupational requirements, a candidate needs to have the right competencies. Surprisingly, modern business mostly concentrates on soft skills rather than hard skills. As a result, it may give preference to graduates who lack the needed experience and strong technical know-how. With regard to international business skills, there is a tendency that soft skills in the areas like influencing, cooperating, thinking adaptively, and communicating cross culturally are critical for employability and success. This article explores all of them and also foregrounds the importance of language skills, decisive in the recruitment process and further professional career. However, fluent communication in foreign languages, without thorough knowledge of cultural differences and personal networking abilities, might be perceived as ineffective. This article aims to show a connection between language competencies developed by graduates of foreign language studies, combined with their awareness of soft skills and cultural differences. With this combination a young candidate is considered to be competitive on the labor market.

Keywords: skills; international business; competencies in business; recruitment process; soft skills

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on presenting the competencies that are highly recommended in the international business environment. The globalization that has been happening for a number of years has proved that young employees need to quickly adjust to various situations in order to be perceived as effective members of an international team. Whether they plan to land a job at a top multinational company, look for a new career in other countries, or start their own business venture, there are skills that are pivotal for each of this activity. Without them it might be extremely difficult for young employees to assimilate with the daily business culture. Among many competencies, soft skills are perceived to play the crucial role. Examples from the business world show that CEOs are eager to hire people with highly developed soft skills rather than technical knowledge. International business is based on communication, building the relations and understanding cultural differences. According to Rowland (2016), global competence is a cross-cultural fluency which enables a person to have positive and productive interactions with people from other cultures. It is a set of skills that allows one to quickly and effectively become well-versed in the activities that facilitate success in another culture, and the ability to “style switch” when the situation calls for it. Moreover, soft skills help people to tackle various situations beyond the learnt knowledge or procedure.

More than a decade ago, when my professional career started, businesses were almost exclusively defined by markers such as turnovers, profits, as well as market shares. Nowadays, productivity itself is not a guarantee for success. The way companies cooperate, communicate with customers, advertise their products or services, and how they are flexible with trends defines their places on the business scale. Soft skills guarantee development and quick adjustment to new situations and market demands.

Students ought to be aware of the fact that during their studies that what matters is not only grades, but also whether they are independent, responsible, and cooperative. Developing these competencies at the academic level is of high importance for their future international business careers. A person with well-developed soft skills becomes a great candidate for companies because they are perceived as more effective and profitable for the firm. Therefore, for young students, it is essential to broaden their academic knowledge gained through studying with a range of practical accomplishments that involve developing soft skills.

Among the many important competencies, there are a few that might be perceived as essential for students who would like to develop their future careers in international sectors. This article presents those types of competencies that will help language studies students to find the work and adjust to a new, business world.

2. Foreign language skills

The business world is constantly evolving. Becoming fluent in a foreign language creates many possibilities in the business world, mostly on the international level. Foreign languages seem to be highly important in business communication. Many organizations appreciate foreign language skills as it may give them a competitive advantage over others on the market. Hiring employees who do not have abilities to use foreign languages in the daily business contacts is risky and worthless. In my career I was responsible for building my own team; as a result, I participated in many interviews. All of the team members were obliged to speak English at an advanced level because of fact that my team dealt with international cases, contacted suppliers, and colleagues from other countries. I remember when I was searching for a new employee with the banking and financial background. One candidate seemed to be perfect for this role as she had been working in the banking sector for years. However, she did not communicate fluently in English. I was persuaded to hire a person without the financial experience but with a good command of the English language. This situation shows that language is perceived to be one of the most important factors in the recruitment process due to the fact that international business may not exist without the people speaking foreign languages. Moreover, it is a skill that cannot be learnt during the probation period. Acquiring language fluency requires more than three months; therefore, candidates with high level of English are most often considered as future employees of a given company.

The benefits of understanding the role of using the foreign languages in business is pivotal because of conversations, communications and negotiations between practitioners and foreign customers. Practitioners may run the businesses without the obstacles with the use of foreign languages (Rasouli et al., 2008) and their customers from abroad may feel more comfortable. Clients require a high level service or product no matter where they order them. With productive communication, clients receive exactly what they want. On the contrary, if language communication problems appear, the customer might be confused and the service becomes poor. It may surely influence further cooperation.

Moreover, being competitive on the market is one of the most important aspects in the current business world. It is almost impossible to stay competitive without the employees who speak foreign languages. "Customer 1" is given priority in many international companies. This leads to mostly English speaking employees being hired so that they might serve all customers without any communication obstacles. Otherwise, the level of customer satisfaction from the service may be low and it is unacceptable for the business owners. Being competent in the use of a foreign language provides a competitive edge in career choices in the

contemporary job market (Ebling, 2005). Most companies want their new employees to possess foreign language skills and need people with high level of proficiency. Young graduates of language studies have great opportunities to be competitive on the job market with their highly developed language skills.

3. Intercultural competencies

International business would never exist without the intercultural competence that is present in every business activity. Selling, negotiations, purchasing, and customer service are based on culture. While preparing for negotiations with foreigners, it is obligatory to pay attention to their culture and use different techniques and strategies while negotiating, for example, with Chinese partners than with Scandinavians. Each country has its own root of business behaviors and the key to success is to know it before we start cooperation. It is not always easy but practice makes perfect. The more we do business at an international level and consciously gain new knowledge about our cultural business partners' backgrounds, the more effective we become.

Intercultural competency is required not only from managers but also from all employees who interact with people from another culture through mails and domestic teams. In reality, there are very few today who do not meet the criteria for needing the level of intercultural competency. Because independence and interconnectedness increase, it is vital that people know how to interact and collaborate effectively with others who have very different backgrounds (Rowland, 2016). When one is familiar with cultural differences, there are teams from different business who function as one team sharing a lot of best practices and learning from each other, boosting revenues. Being able to cooperate with other business units serves well, as owners seek to unlock value across cultures and time zones for clients (Hewlett, 2015).

Before doing business, checking the cultural habits and customs are essential, especially when partners are from totally different backgrounds. Storti (2017) gives an example of negotiations between Arabs and Americans. He points out that "Americans should first listen to and then quietly subtract 50 percent of what their Arab colleagues promise." Moreover, in order to adjust to the situation Americans should feel free to exaggerate, otherwise Arabs may not take them seriously or they may even think they are not interested in the matter under discussion. However, Arabs ought to realize that Americans often take exaggerations much more literally than other Arabs ever would. If Americans do not exaggerate enough, Arabs should not interpret that as a lack of enthusiasm or interest; they are just trying to be honest and not misleading.

In order to be ready for international business, young graduates of language studies should use every opportunity to gather information about cultural differences. Erasmus programs are highly recommended in this respect because during such travels students may see how to build relations with colleagues from other countries. Moreover, they learn how to communicate effectively in various cultures and how to adjust to many situations.

During job interviews, recruiters may ask questions about some nations in order to check if the candidate is aware of the cultural differences. It is important to know at least the basic information. My team members were asked to travel abroad and discuss some business cases after a few months of working with us. Without the knowledge about the cultures, it would have been impossible for them to build the relations and resolve the business cases together with their colleagues from other countries. Sometimes there are really "small things" that make a difference. In China, for example, a business card should be given with two hands and with a delicate bow. Not knowing about it, a visitor may seem surprised. However, the ability to adjust to the situation quickly makes the cooperation easier. Another example from my personal experience was connected with implementing a new application that was supposed to optimize one international process. When being asked to be a part of the project I was told that this application should have been working a long time before. After checking the blocks and stops, it was found that the main reason was that the communication between the project members had failed. Therefore, for me, it was of high importance to lead the project properly by taking into account all cultural differences and communication challenges. Finally, we succeeded and the new application was implemented after one year of working over it. However, it was a really challenging experience for me and other members of the project.

Cross cultural communication requires an amount of respect, diplomacy, and sensitivity. It also needs an open mind approach and often, at least a little bit of research. Sometimes knowing how people from other cultures interpret various body language signals can be fundamental in business. For example, the time of maintaining the eye contact differ in various countries and knowledge about it can help to avoid misunderstanding and facilitate better workplace communication.

Self-development is essential in knowing cultural differences. Rowland (2016) shows thirteen points that might be helpful in this process. First of all, constant learning is a priority. Knowledge will help to navigate the new territory and be agile in working in different cultures. However, seeing each person as an individual is also required. Everyone is unique and the guidelines that are learnt about the cultures ought to be treated as the "prototype" not as a "stereotype." In my personal career I have met people from the same country but with completely different approaches to business. Additionally, constant learning may help us become an expert in cultural differences. It is a never-ending story so

that everyone who wants to achieve the success in international business is obliged to learn constantly, not only at the beginning of the career. Another crucial point is withholding the judgement. By judging we have the tendency to use our own values to evaluate actions based on a different value system. It is better not to formulate opinions while cooperating internationally. Observing is perceived as a key to success. Moreover, showing respect to everyone is the single most valuable trait a negotiator can possess. By being involved in various negotiations situations while representing my clients in negotiations or participating together with them in that process some observations have been made by me. Those who show respect to cultural differences often achieve their goals much quicker and succeed in business more often. If people feel that they are respected, they tend to behave more openly and they are more eager to close the transaction quicker. It is worth mentioning that many cultures communicate with body language more than orally; therefore, observation during the meeting is decisive so that body signals may help in understanding the situation and finding the best way to make the business deal. Switching style might also be really helpful. Some cultures are sensitive to loss of face. By being direct by nature, the relation can be destroyed unless the style is switched into more indirect approach when the topic is sensitive. Additionally, finding commonalities might be helpful in creating engagement with the business partners. Using the knowledge of different culture builds trust in ways that are meaningful to each person. Talking about the cultural differences openly makes the international cooperation easier. Even mapping those differences may help in building the relations and finding the solutions. Of course, active listening is necessary to clarify the meaning and, consequently, understand the message. In my opinion, students possess the ability to build a network, which gives them privilege. Most cultures share a sense of reciprocity. By doing the favors to others, sharing the information or investing on other's developments, a type of professional interpersonal capital is acquired.

According to Rowland (2016), developing all of the competencies may require some tenacious effort. However, like with any skills, the unfamiliar might need conscious repetition before it becomes second nature. The success in business with another culture is no different than adjusting to any new environment. It is the key to success in any international business.

Small talk is perceived as one of the most important tools in building relations. Certainly, it is much easier for English speaking employees, so that they might discuss various topics not only connected with business itself during coffee breaks. However, young members of teams might find it challenging to find proper topics for small talk. Reading the newspapers from other countries seems to be helpful in this case. It also develops the sense of curiosity and appreciation for cultural differences.

Being flexible is the trait that is mostly acquired easier by younger employees and it helps in international business relations. If there is lack of flexibility, it will bring frustration and lack of success. On the other hand, while using a different skill, method and style, the chances of success increase significantly. Rowland (2016) suggests also practicing silence. There are cultures in which silence is treated as a sign of respect, might be also a chance to think before speaking, but also indirect indication of rejection. Additionally, silence has been used by me as a method of negotiation and it has also helped me to manage my emotions. Losing control in business is a huge disadvantage and it puts a person in a precarious position.

Without the knowledge of cultural differences plenty of misunderstandings may occur. However, as soon as people realize that such misunderstandings are a result of legitimate cultural differences and no one ever tries to confuse or frustrate them, the cooperation is easier. Certainly, in some situations partners might feel embarrassed, but still embarrassed people are willing to cooperate (Storti, 2017). My first business visit in India was a perfect example of misunderstanding. During the negotiations my Hindu partners were constantly nodding. It was considered by me as a sign of agreeing with my proposals. However, after coming back to the hotel and opening the mailbox I noticed that, unfortunately, most of the offered solutions were not acceptable for them. Later, I found out that nodding during the meeting is for Hindu people a typical custom and it means nothing. Such "small issues" may have a huge impact on our business relations, contracts, and agreements. Not surprisingly, it is better to know them before we start the meeting or fly to another country to do business.

4. Soft skills

Soft skills are one of the most appreciated competencies while hiring new members. While interviewing candidates, questions that checked soft skills were of high importance to me. I needed to know if a person is able to work in a team, knows how to communicate with others, likes changes in the organizations or if they fit into my existing team. An HR BP (Human Resources Business Partner) always helped me in each interview and in analyzing candidates' answers. I was surprised how much we may know about a person by asking such easy questions as:

- What is your hobby?
- Which sport do you prefer?
- What do you do when you make a mistake?
- If there were no limits, who would you like to be?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

These are only examples of many questions that might be asked while checking the soft skills of a candidate. By analyzing answers, we could identify if a potential candidate fits exactly into our job profile and, especially, into our already existing team. If someone says that their hobby is crocheting or knitting and talks about different styles of it, details, we might be sure that this person normally focuses on details and is really precise in everything they do. On the other hand, if a candidate mentions extreme sports as their hobby, it is a sign that they are adventurous and do not worry about obstacles. I was taught how to analyze such answers thanks to a long time cooperation with an international HR department.

However, what surprised me a lot was the fact that many young candidates were not able to answer such questions. They were shocked and, definitely, it was their first time when they had heard them. Nowadays, it is rather obvious that soft skills are checked either by interviewing the candidates or by testing them with the help of personal tests such as *Discovery Inside*, *Talent Dynamics*, or *Gallup Strengths Assessment*. When it comes to hiring executives or managers we also used to use *Thomas International*. Such tests help a lot in checking candidates' predispositions, their talents, strengths, and weaknesses. But, also, we obtain knowledge about their way of working, handling the stress, and cooperating. When I talked about such tests with my colleagues from Scandinavian countries, I was told that they use them in almost every recruitment process. Of course, this option is not cheap; however, when calculating the cost of high rate of employee rotation, it often shows that such personal tests are much more profitable and beneficial for the company, because only proper people are hired.

We spend far more time on testing the soft skills of the candidate than on checking their technical knowledge and experience. Our Board gave clear instructions that in international business soft skills are number one and we are obliged to create teams that would fit the company's values. Experience and qualifications were also important and obviously checked during the recruiting process; however, soft skills were number one for us.

Checking if a candidate is eager to collaborate is a crucial point in all recruiting processes. To become successful in international business, building network is a key. The ability to collaborate and work together for a common goal is a priority in business. Humility, allowing others to take the lead and share credit for success are also needed. Moreover, confidence to tackle problems, giving and receiving feedback are required, too. In an international business environment, collaborating with team members from other cultures is mostly profitable. Certainly, it creates the possibility to use and develop cross-cultural communication skills. Additionally, it exposes an employee to new perspectives and ways of handling difficult business challenges.

The ability to listen actively is also a highly appreciated competency for many business people. As Higgins (2018) mentions, eye contact is a necessary body language technique while listening the business partners. Observing the face or face signals might be the key to success in negotiation and any other business meetings. This skill might not be natural but it is worth working on and testing. Listening with influence involves activating good body language and avoiding distraction. Haggins (2018) also points out the importance of emotional self-management is decisive in business. On the other hand, young people may perceive it as highly difficult at first. I truly recommend participating in business meetings as much as possible. By observing more experienced colleagues, young employees can learn directly from practice how to behave and what to do exactly to be successful in business.

O'Hara and Leicester (2019) point out that constant learning is the crucial competence of 21st century:

- Learning to be.
- Learning to be together.
- Learning to know.
- Learning to do.

Times where people graduated from universities and after that did nothing for their development are long gone. The modern world requires constant learning and adjusting to new situations. During my cooperation with young students, I have noticed that they are eager to obtain new knowledge and to be open to new solutions. This means that working in an international business environment will be much easier for them. The constant change is certain in many organizations. Ability to adjust to it is one of the fundamental competencies. Merges and acquisitions appear so often on the market and such processes might be extremely stressful for employees. They are not certain whether their positions are stable after the merging or whether they should start looking for other jobs. There are also other aspects that undergo change, such as structures of companies, systems of managing and also managers and directors can be new. Therefore, young people ought to be aware of the fact that changes appear and will appear during all of their international career. I have also experienced a merge myself and I could observe the behavior of my colleagues during this difficult time. I was astonished that most of the younger employees went through these changes rather smoothly. My older colleagues, on the other hand, who had been working in the company for many years before the merge, did not seem to accept the change quickly. Some of them were even so frustrated that they decided to leave the company. It may indicate that young people possess the competence to accept the change more readily and this gives them a more advantageous position in such contexts.

5. Conclusion

Being able to fit into the international business environment gives great opportunities for young candidates to start the career. Nowadays, multinational companies are looking to see if employees have what it takes to get the job done. In addition to meeting the educational and occupational requirements, soft skills are mostly checked before hiring a new team member. Speaking foreign languages is perceived as the most important competency because of the fact that fluent communication with partners, suppliers, or customers frequently contributes to the success of a company. As a result, foreign language students may have a certain advantage in the recruitment process.

The ability to understand other cultures is invaluable. Knowing how to behave in a specific business situation all around the world creates various opportunities, and employees who possess this knowledge are most influential. Customer service is obliged to be on a high level in order to be competitive on the market; therefore, team members need to know how to serve people from different cultures and how to do business with foreigners. This competency requires time, but if young people are aware of this during their studies, they may start gathering the knowledge about cultural differences earlier.

Communication and cooperation are easier when the candidates have concrete soft skills. When working in business, one is expected to collaborate with other colleagues and business partners. Therefore, during interviews, the recruiters and future managers pay a lot of attention to such skills. They check how the potential candidate behaves in different situations to see if they fit the company values. Language studies graduates have a great opportunity there with their ability to speak foreign languages. By acquiring the awareness of cultural differences, communication competencies and soft skills, they might become competitive during the interviews, even if they do not have previous experience in professional environment.

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