

MULTICULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN SUCCESSFUL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES: THE CASE OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF DSPAT (BULGARIA)

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Abstract:

Cultural variety is one of the primary characteristics of contemporary European societies. As a result, more and more companies should operate on different territories/countries and face different languages and cultures. This should not be a real problem, however, as a number of authors and leading global firms explicitly acknowledge the importance of a diverse workforce to serve an also increasingly diverse customer range.

On the above basis, this research is focused on the Bulgarian Municipality of Dospat, a region with a diverse religious and ethnic composition, aiming the identification of key issues related to multicultural interactions in the successful economic activities in the area. In this sense, and even when exploratory, our findings suggest the positive influence of multiculturalism in the success of economic activities.

Keywords: *multiculturalism; local development; business success; Bulgaria; Municipality of Dospat*

INTERACCIONES MULTICULTURALES EN ACTIVIDADES ECONÓMICAS DE ÉXITO: EL CASO DEL MUNICIPIO DE DSPAT (BULGARIA)

Resumen:

La variedad cultural es una de las características primarias de las sociedades europeas contemporáneas. Como resultado de ello cada vez más empresas deben operar en diferentes territorios/países y hacer frente a diversidad de lenguas y culturas. Esto no debería ser un verdadero problema, sin embargo, ya que numerosos autores y empresas líderes a nivel global reconocen explícitamente la importancia de una fuerza de trabajo diversa para servir un rango de clientes también cada vez más diverso.

Sobre esa base, esta investigación se centra en el Municipio búlgaro de Dospat, una región con diferentes religiones y etnias, al objeto de identificar los aspectos clave relativos a las interacciones multiculturales en las actividades económicas de éxito de dicho territorio. En este sentido, y aun cuando exploratorios, los resultados sugieren la influencia positiva de la multiculturalidad en el éxito de las actividades económicas.

Palabras clave: *multiculturalidad; desarrollo local; éxito empresarial; Bulgaria; Municipio de Dospat*

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1. Introduction

Cultural variety is one of the primary traits of contemporary European societies. The diversity of population in many regions is changing rapidly. New communities are created by people of different age, sex, race, ethnic background, physical capacity, faith. Research on the topic of why certain settlements and regions have more competitive economies has shown that cultural diversity is one of the factors contributing towards this fact (Irish Ministry for Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2007). The mixing of local and “foreign” (imported) traditions enriches cultural practices and supports the faster integration of workers and employees hired for work within a multicultural environment.

The whole society is more and more pressed by such tendencies. Namely, more and more companies should operate on different territories/countries, so facing different languages and cultures. As a consequence, many companies are actively recruiting the best professionals from all over the world. As highlighted by an United Nations report on challenges and opportunities for doing business on the basis of world multiculturalism, “...to be successful in an inter-connected world, businesses of all sizes and in every country must be able to compete effectively in diverse, multicultural environments”(Aramian 2009, p. 16).

Additionally, the recent period of global economic crisis has significantly increased unemployment statistics and influenced –as direct consequence– mobility not only within the European Union territory, but also outside its borders. The increasing number of multiple cultural interactions at workplaces in organizations is likely to continue at the global level, which is a major indicator of the evidence that most workplaces will be –or at least they should be should– built up as convergence areas of people, diverse in terms of ethnicity and culture.

Intercultural interaction within working environments has brought to highlight the necessity of positive contacts between groups and individuals, assuming an exchange of cultural values and traditions at this purpose. A multicultural work environment can promote adequate conditions for the introduction of various work practices, new kinds of entrepreneurship activities, as well as other innovative approaches, which are established and contribute towards the success of business structures and any economic activity.

Namely, a very common process has been observed in Bulgaria in most recent years: an increasing number of business companies, as well as public institutions, are developing their operational practices more and more based on multicultural interaction, engaging and hiring staff with various ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, this is a result of the changing structure of Bulgarian society due to migrants flow out-/in-creating a changed structure of the domestic labour market; on the other hand, it comes from corporate characteristics, needs and attitude towards employees’ multiculturalism.

In the above mentioned report, managing cultural diversity is suggested as a business imperative and then the ability to manage this diversity is highlighted as an increasingly recognized skill by companies as a business imperative, due to a number of reasons, including (Aramian 2009):

- the design and implementation of diverse and inclusive workplaces, which can be a determining success factor regarding a company’s ability to attract, retain and motivate the best talent, helping to ensure that each person can contribute his or her skills, knowledge and perspective to the success of the business;
- the capacity to recognize and respond to the diverse and changing needs of customers in the marketplace, which becomes fundamental in terms of the creativity and flexibility that fuel innovation, then ensuring a continued demand for a company’s goods and/or services; and
- the ability to manage critical relationships with public (government) authorities and local communities, which a requisite to ensure that the company has a “license to operate” in diverse markets all around the world.

In this sense, Thomas already stressed years ago (1990, p. 10) that “companies are faced with the problem of surviving in a fiercely competitive world with a workforce that consists and will continue to consist of unassimilated diversity. And the engine will take a great deal of tinkering to burn that fuel”. More recently, Keršienė and Savanevičienė (2005, p. 45) categorically stated that “understanding the influence of cultural interactions in organizational settings is now a fundamental requirement of effective management. Organization multicultural competence is one of the core competence constituents”. Such evidence acknowledges the importance of researching on multicultural issues at workplaces.

Leading global firms as the Swiss financial-services company UBS also explicitly acknowledge the importance of a diverse workforce in serving an increasingly diverse customer base, stating that “a diverse workforce increases the ability to deal with diverse clients and reach out to new investors by providing innovative solutions and services of a superior quality and value. Diversity also forms an important part of developing a strong and compelling corporate culture in the workplace” (Snider et al. 2003, p.182).

On the above basis, the main goal of this paper is identifying some key issues related to multicultural interactions in successful economic activities in a region with a diverse religious and ethnic composition: the Municipality of Dospat, which is located in the Bulgarian region of High Western Rhodopes. At this purpose, we also aim to recognize the management attitude towards attracting multicultural workforce as well as towards policy tools both at companies and at public institutions (namely state level) to promote multiculturalism.

2. Multiculturalism: essence and basic understandings

The current interest towards issues related to multiculturalism (regardless their theoretical or empirical character) is due to the fact that cultural differences in a society which is organised within the borders of a state/region, not only show no signs of disappearing or fading but, on the contrary, they exhibit a clear trend towards growth.

The terms “multicultural society” and “multiculturalism” emerged in Canada during the 1960’s, in relation to the management of the bicultural English-French situation, even when the phenomenon they designate has been known since ancient times, and they received official recognition in 1971 (Therborn 2001). Later on, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act passed in 1988 acknowledged that multiculturalism is woven into the very fabric of the Canadian life (Lewis 2006).

The term “multiculturalism” (“multicultural”) is used in different contexts, including political (relating to policy and institutions), empirical (describing different societies), political and social theory, and philosophy. In one or another context, the word is used by both the supporters and opponents of this phenomenon (Therborn 2001). As stated by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005, p. 404) “in multicultural situations, the various cultures of the interactants interact with and influence encounters, which, in turn, influence the nature of discourse”. Following Therborn (2001), most of all multiculturalism brings forth culture in the sense of identity.

Nowadays, post-national multiculturalism has a sporadic variable character and often occurs as a consequence of ethnic groups’ self-affirmation. Multiculturalism in such societies is to a greater extent inherited, rather than emerging.

Towards the middle of the 20th century it became clear that even the consistent implementation of policy for overcoming cultural diversity and merging the various ethnic groups within the state into a unified civil nation did not produce the expected results. Ethnic identities continue to maintain their self-identification. It becomes clear that the idea of overcoming cultural difference is not viable.

The failure of the assimilation strategy brought forth the idea of developing a new strategy based on the idea of ethnic policy for the internal integration of the political society, accompanied by measures fostering cultural diversity. Multiculturalism appears to be one such strategy. Democratic states begin to realise and recognise the value of cultural diversity and cease to believe that cultural heterogeneity is subject to overcoming or rectification (Avanesova 2012).

The idea of tolerance within a society has been reviewed by some authors not as a position of self-restriction and deliberate non-interference, but as an accord of mutual tolerance, as well as accepting others the way they are and stating one’s readiness to interact with them (Amelin 2004). Interethnic tolerance is exhibited in the actions and deeds, yet its formation occurs in the field of the mind and, according to ethnosociologists, is closely tied to ethnic identity.

To a great extent, the formation of tolerance depends on the political and social-economic conditions within the country. The same way, from the perspective of sociological resources, multiculturalism is more often defined as a “system of beliefs and behaviour, which recognizes and honours the presence of various groups within an organization or society, recognizes and appreciates their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and allows their continued contribution within the community, in a unifying cultural context, which gives an opportunity to everyone within the frame of the organization or society”

(Grishaeva 2012, p. 916). AS a concept, it assumes a special logic and comes off as an instrument for cooperation between groups, aimed at maintaining a specific culture, and coverage of the individual and the group with regard to equal access to all areas of public life, from politics to culture (Grishaeva 2012).

Regions, as territorial references where we can appreciate the close interaction of community groups bearing various cultural values and traditions, have the potential to develop the diversity of the local economy, which could revitalise them and support the renovation of the environment.

As regards the workforce, the first source of cultural diversity is the structure of the population. The labour force in a country/region is to a large extent a reflection of its population, so the more the population differs, the more this growing diversity is reflected at workplaces.

Leading global firms also refer to diversity. Namely, the Dutch multinational oil and gas company Shell defines this concept as “all the ways in which we differ,” most organizations being focused at this purpose on issues of gender and race (Grishaeva 2012, p. 922).

In spite the most common traits used to identify the level of multiculturalism evidenced in a given workforce often boils down to age, sex, ethnicity, physical ability, race, sexual orientation, it is important to specify the prevailing multicultural significance in terms of managing needs and business development effects. So, the process of planning on a local, regional and national level should be sensitive towards the increasing cultural diversity and should aim, where possible, to support the needs of all level of stakeholders: business, employees, community/society and state.

3. Multicultural interactions in successful economic activities in the Municipality of Dospat

The focus of this research is on Dospat, a Bulgarian municipality in which 18 economic entities performing within a multicultural environment were studied. Dospat is a region with ethnic diversity among the population. Furthermore, within the town and the municipality, there are not only representative individuals of different ethnic groups and religious confessions, but there is also a variety of mother tongues. The region’s geopolitical position within the course of historical development of the country played an evident role in the formation of the current social-economic situation, in which different communities have coexisted for centuries.

The Municipality of Dospat is characterised by a municipal centre in which most of the inhabitants are concentrated into, as well as by several smaller populated areas with mostly older population remains. The population has a mixed ethnic structure, the primary groups being Bulgarians, Turks and Roma. It also includes representatives of various religious communities (in accordance with their faith, the basic groups being Eastern Orthodox and Muslim).

According to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) from the Census of 2011 in the *Municipal Development Plan for the period 2014-2020*, with regard to ethnic identification, 86.00% of the inhabitants of the Municipality of Dospat described themselves as Bulgarian, 0.6% as Roma, 0.7% as Turks, and remaining 13.7% indicated another ethnic identification. A very enlightening fact about the municipality is that 43% of the surveyed persons did not answer the question about their ethnic self-identification. As indicated in the *Strategy for Local Development 2011–2015 of the territory “High Western Rhodopes” (Municipalities of Borino and Dospat)*, more than 90% of the population in the Municipality of Dospat are Bulgarian Muslims and the rest are mostly mixed groups. It should be noted, however, that mutual understanding and intercultural cooperation has existed in the region for a long time.

Economy in Dospat can be defined as following a service-industrial profile. An analysis of the local economy’s sector structure makes it evident that the leading fields are tourism, light manufacturing, commerce and agriculture (Municipality of Dospat 2013). Main activities are potatoes and livestock production, forestry, wood processing, fish farming and processing, knitwear and footwear production and tailoring. In summer, there are chances for seasonal labour force in tourism and other activities such as collecting wild mushrooms, herbs and berries (blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and wild strawberries).

The largest relative share belongs to the firms working in the field of commerce (70% of all ventures within the territory). Some 5% of businesses operate as hotels or restaurants, some 15% in the processing industry sector, 3% in agriculture, and 7% in construction (Municipality of Dospat 2006).

4. Exploratory study in the Municipality of Dospat: methodological issues, results and discussion

Data about the different issues considered to describe the situation in the Municipality of Dospat were obtained from primary sources, namely, a survey was conducted through a questionnaire addressed to Bulgarian companies operating within the territory of the municipality.

In this sense, most business organizations include multicultural workforce in their staffs. The questionnaire was delivered in person to employers (managers) in 25 of those firms, and 18 of them agreed to answer it. Due to the convenience sample, as well as the sample size, the research should be considered as exploratory.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: i) the first part included issues on the legal, historical and economic profile of the firm; ii) the second part featured questions related to the multicultural structure of the firm and its role for the business's success; and iii) the third part was focused on the perception of the existence of integration tools both in the concrete company and, in a general sense, at national level.

Prior to consider any result, it is necessary to bear in mind that the responses to the survey questions often required the respondents' position and opinion, which assumed potential subjective assessments affected to a large extent by the individuals' ethnic identification, their social and public status, their cultural interests and their behavioural habits for work in a multicultural environment (some 60% of respondents were Bulgarian Muslims).

All businesses included in the study were registered as firms. 50% of them were sole-proprietor limited companies, and 50% were limited companies. 6% of the firms were joint-stock companies. Most of them were established in the period 1990-2000, which is in accordance to the new situation due to the democratic social changes that occurred after 1989 in the country.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the companies on the basis of their economic activities. The firms were engaged in a number of primary activities for the municipality, the biggest shares belonging to commerce, processing industry (wood-processing, fish-processing and milk-processing) and tourism sectors. Some of the activities are part of the local populace's livelihood (agriculture).

The specificities of the regional business structure explains the largest 55% share of micro-ventures (staffs up to 9 people) in the conducted survey (Figure 2). This group was followed by 28% of medium-sized (50-100 employees), an big-sized (over 100) companies.

Figure 1. Distribution of the companies in the survey (%) on the basis of their economic activities

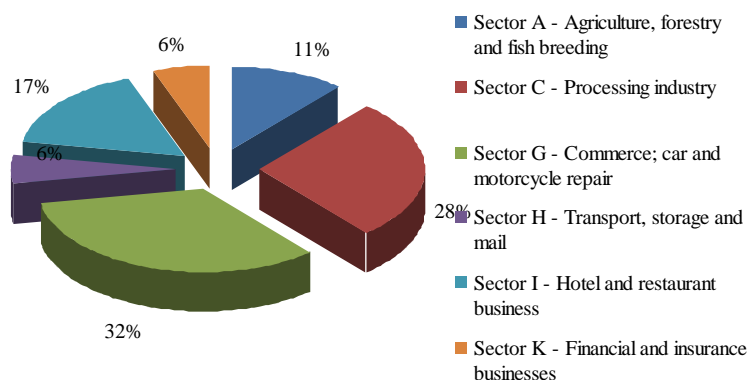
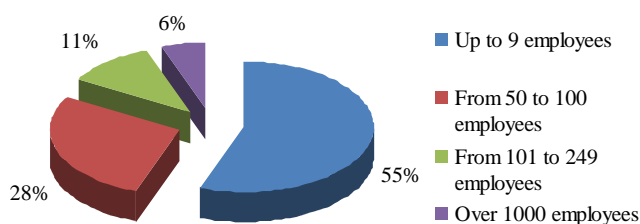


Figure 2. Distribution of the companies in the survey (%) on the basis of their size (number of employees)



Regarding their economic results (Figure 3), 44% of companies indicated that they were successfully obtaining profitable results at the moment, while 50% mentioned that they were experiencing difficulties due to the still ongoing economic crisis in the country, and 6% declared negative results that would probably lead to a business-ending.

Surprisingly, 28% of companies declared that they were not operating within a multicultural environment (Figure 4). These were micro-firms with a huge percentage of part-time workers. In this sense, in spite of defining themselves as monoculture organizations, it is important to become aware of the necessity to recognize the inter-cultural environment even during the part of the working period.

An interesting notion for this region is the connection between ethnic and religious identity, and mother tongue. As in case of the total population, the employed labour force consists of two main ethnical groups –Bulgarian and Bulgarian Muslims–, which are identified with the prevailing religions –Christianity and Islamic–.

Moreover, one third of the respondents declared they had hired people in a disadvantaged position, which is mainly a result of the conducted state policy after the effectiveness of the Employment Promotion Act in 2002 and Bulgaria's entry into the European Union. At any case, there was an unanimous position of the respondents (100%) regarding the need for an adaptation period for the team members when they start working at a company with a pronounced multicultural environment.

The answers to the question regarding the role of the multicultural environment for the successful functioning of the company (Figure 5) confirmed the assumed hypothesis in this study about the positive influence of multicultural differences on achieving better results in terms of business performance. Namely, 77% of respondents answered affirmatively to this question, while 6% answered negatively and 17% did not found a relationship. This findings confirm the results from other studies which have shown a direct link between the amount of diversity in a workplace and the company's success.

Figure 3. Distribution of the companies in the survey (%) on the basis of their economic results

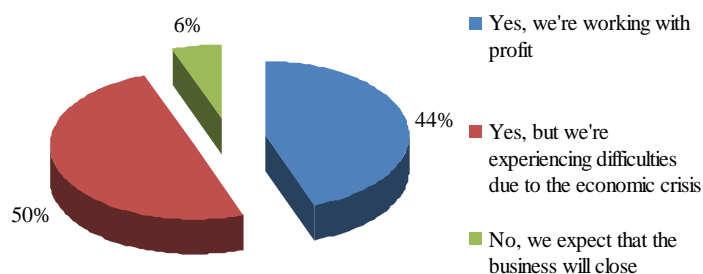


Figure 4. Statements describing the multicultural structure of the staffs (%)

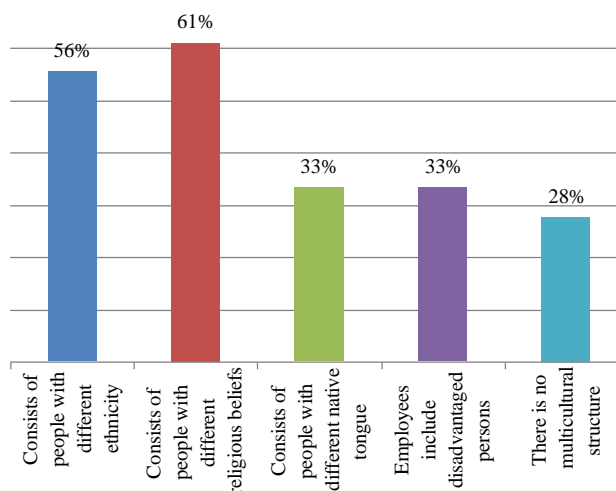
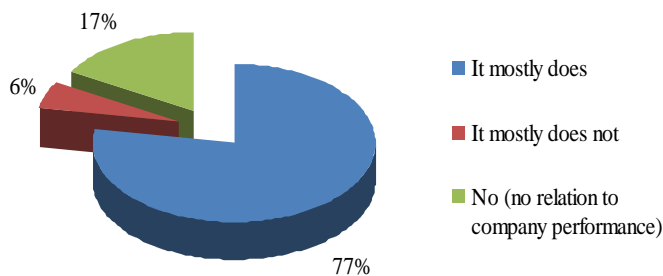


Figure 5. Perceived role of multiculturalism in the successful performance of the company (%)



More than a half of respondents agreed about the positive consequences of implementing the four proposed tools in terms of promoting adequate conditions for good relations among employees from different cultural groups. There was a distinguished preference indeed towards applying various approaches, depending on the specific situation in the firm and the good preparation of the managerial staff for working in multicultural environments. Over 50% of the responders also agreed on the necessity of exploring additional ways of social contacts and a periodical vocational training for employees.

As shown in Figure 7, companies' expectations on public intervention to promote better relations within multicultural environments were mostly related to the development of strategies, plans and programmes related to the process of cultural integration of different cultural communities, as well as to the development of measures for financial support of business units with a multicultural staff.

Figure 6. Perception on different ways to promote better relations within a multicultural environment (%)

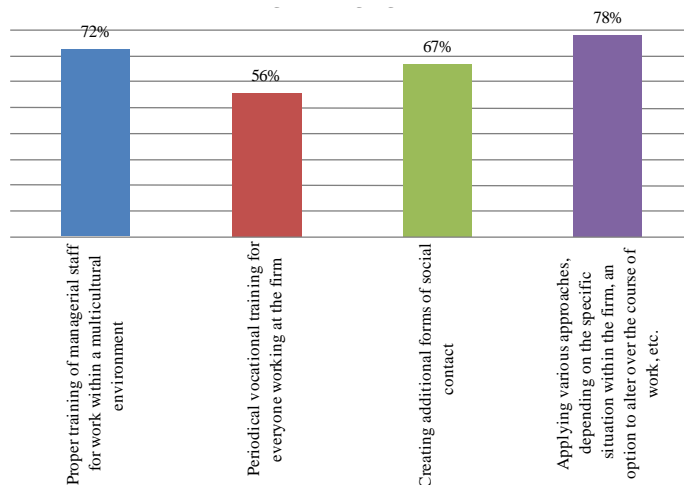
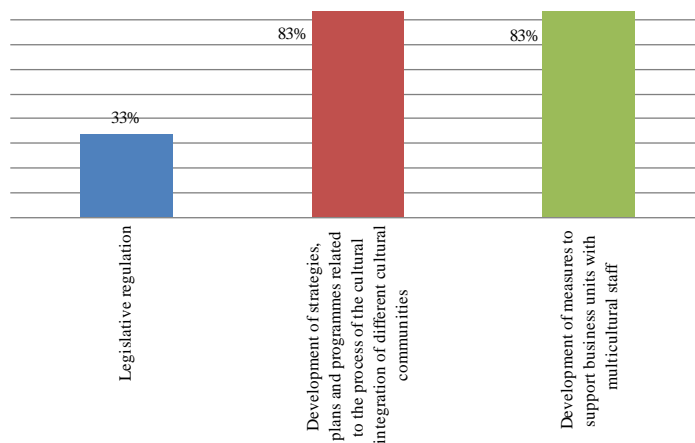


Figure 7. Perception on public activities to promote better relations within a multicultural environment (%)



The employers' readiness to hire people with different religious identity, different mother tongue, immigrants, representatives of ethnic minorities and people in disadvantaged condition was impressive (Figure 8), as even those respondents who define their business organizations as monocultural expressed their willingness to attract diverse workforce.

Moreover, all respondents suggested the presence of cultural interactions at workplaces when stating that individuals inevitably borrow elements of foreign/different cultures when they work within a multicultural environment (100%). The responses on concrete borrowed elements are specified in Figure 9, which shows that phraseological expressions are adopted to the greatest extent (94%), followed by learning songs, celebrating holidays, and trying out culinary recipes for specific meals (67% each).

Furthermore, a "unique" culmination of cultural interactions would be the perception on the development of marital relationships on the basis (as a result) of an initial "professional familiarity". Such perception was shared by 50% of respondents (Figure 10).

Figure 8. Employers' inclination towards hiring people promoting a multicultural environment (%)

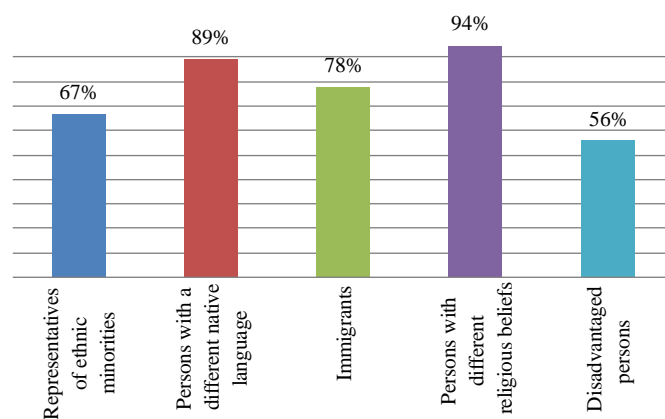


Figure 9. Perception on borrowed elements when working within a multicultural environment (%)

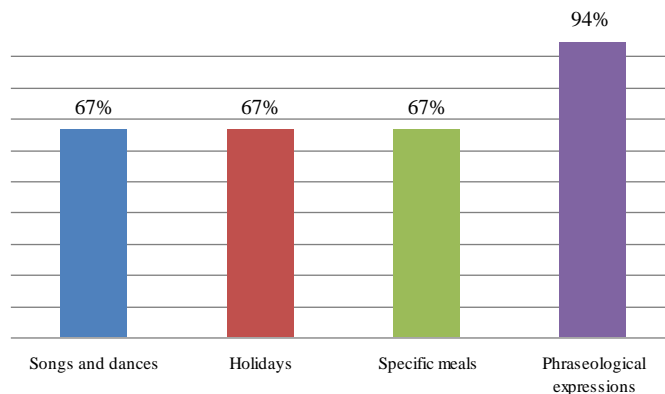


Figure 10. Perception on the development of marital relationships on the basis of an initial "professional familiarity" (%)



5. Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the widest possible aspect of viewpoints, opinions and interpretations, substantial conclusions can be drawn regarding the performance of business enterprises hiring people with different religious identities, mother tongues, immigrants, representatives of ethnic minorities and individuals in a disadvantaged condition. Global trends indeed support the positive influence of working in multicultural environments. Moreover, diverse leading multinational companies had states such positive influence as one of the primary reasons explaining their successful business activities.

Then, and due to the impact of multicultural working environments in the economic development, more and more business units become a place of sharing and cooperation for achieving common aims, bearing in mind the imperative need to work efficiently under competition pressures, which is not only an essential requirement, but also a strong incentive for a better management of intercultural interactions, thereby creating a significant contribution by establishing and promoting a better intercultural understanding within the broader environment of society.

Under current market conditions, Bulgarian firms are increasingly becoming both multicultural and international businesses. Within this new context, individuals in any position within the workplace's hierarchical structure must face new challenges and a need for additional skills, which are often different from those of their own cultural group. Managing a workforce that is diverse in terms of cultural aspects requires a rethinking of existing policies and procedures, as well as an emphasis on the dynamics of processes related to pluralism, warranties, protection of social rights and the right to self-identity, and cooperation.

In this sense, respondents in the conducted study at the Municipality of Dospat seem to be convinced about the positive effects of working in multicultural environment, and not only on the basis of the ethnical structure of the population but also through hiring other diverse groups (including disadvantage workers). Thus, the findings from our study acknowledge that multicultural environments boost the better results of economic activities in a region with diverse religious and ethnic compositions and it is primarily located at the basis of policies implemented in companies.

The manifested good interrelation between different cultural categories of the workforce and the exchange of cultural elements (i.e. lexical elements, mutual celebrations, cuisine, and even marriages) appears as one of the main reasons supporting the expressed readiness of organizations to promote and to keep the multiculturalism. This provides a strong base for the business performance.

Those firms which were involved in the research exhibited a potentiality adequate experience, knowledge and usage of skills to properly support intercultural understanding through the application of a specific set of policy tools accordingly to the intended goals and the aimed targets of individuals. However, maintaining multicultural communication in large companies is easier, as the corporate environment is more influenced by the ethics of the company and by established recommended standards for the employee relationships.

The enrichment of key factors determining the success of business practices within a multicultural environment depends on different conditions, including:

- Building positive attitudes within society (as a result of an historical development) towards the cultural achievements of the different ethnic groups and religions, as well as denial of expressions such as racism or xenophobia. At this point, the Bulgarian society is turning from ethnocentrism towards ethnorelativism as a result of the contributions not only from business practices, but also from a number of other sectors, such as private, public, academic, media, NGO's, etc.

- The presence of a substantial legal base guaranteeing tolerance and mutual respect within intercultural communication. As a result of the historical development of the country, nowadays Bulgarian laws in force were aimed at overcoming direct and indirect discrimination in many aspects of public life, namely regarding issues in the field of education and healthcare, as well as with regard to social protection and employment. However, improvements of stimulus for developing multicultural competence and practices are still needed.

- Knowing about and participating in international relationships both at regional and transnational level in order to become companies aware of successful practices and to apply for a proactive and strategic management of the diverse workplaces with multicultural traits.

- The need to prepare and educate employees (namely in Bulgaria) to be adapted and properly face and answer the multicultural challenges under the conditions of national/regional specific traits, the ongoing globalization, foreign investments and international trade.

The accumulation of new empirical material and the application of an interdisciplinary approach in the studying of multicultural interactions would allow the verification of some of the analyses conducted in the observation of successful economic practices in the municipality of Dospat (Bulgaria). In this sense, this paper aims encouraging interest of future research and debates in the field of multicultural interactions and their influence in successful economic practices.

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