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Report

Cross-cultural challenges, and how to deal with them



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1. Business Professional's Analysis

1.1. Methodology

The interviews of the business professionals Kyrill Shumsky and Hanna Johnsson were conducted physically face-to-face with them and with the help of guide questions that we had prepared in advance. These guide questions were created based on what information we needed from them in order to conduct a more in-depth analysis of their cultural aspects. This would be in terms of their personal culture but also the culture of the company which they are employed at. As for the third business professional, Sriram Krishnan, the analysis was made based on: published interviews, the professional's LinkedIn profile, newspaper articles from non-biased publishers and other reliable sources of information.

1.2. Analysis: Kyrill Shumsky

Kiryll Shumsky is a 48-year-old Belarusian entrepreneur with more than 20 years of business experience. Currently, he is running a paper recycling company with more than 70 employees, among whom are Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians. In the past seven years, Mr. Shumsky has established business relations with Poland, China, Russia etc.

The first aspect to be considered in the cultural analysis of Kiryll as a business professional are his identities, that operate in combination and create a polyhedral compound (Samovar et al, 2017, p.245). According to the theory of Turner's identity categories, all the identities could be assigned to the human, social or personal category (Turner, Reynolds, 2012). Since the object of the paper is communication, the focus will be on social identities.

Talking about *gender identity*, Kiryll identifies himself as male. His company does not have a woman quota, however, three out of five positions in the head office are occupied by women, and regardless of gender, employees are paid equally. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2021), in 2018 the gender pay gap in Belarus persisted at 27%, which is almost twice as much as in the EU - 14,1% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). In addition, some studies of post-soviet gender relations illustrate the exclusion of women from the public sphere compared to the Soviet period (Temkina, Zdravomyslova, 2003, p.54). However, answering



the question about the woman quota, the recipient highlighted that he looks at the professional qualities of employees, not their gender.

As the recipient was born and raised in Minsk, Belarus *ethnically and nationally* he identifies himself as Belarusian. However, being born in 1973 Kiryll had spent his childhood and teenage years as a citizen of the USSR, which created a certain affinity with other states-members. One of our interview questions was if he feels a difference in business communication with representatives of other cultures he works with (Russian and Ukrainian). Kiryll answered without thinking that he does not notice any difference and had never faced any difficulties. For instance, he always used the pronoun “us” when talking about Russians and Ukrainians.

The regional identity of the professional does not outweigh his nationality: as a Minsk citizen Kiryll does not separate himself from the rest of the country. As two big offices of the company are located in Grodno and Brest, the recipient was asked if he felt any difference working with people from other regions - the answer was negative.

Despite the fact that, according to Hofstede's model, Belarus is a collectivist culture (Hofstede Insight, 2021), Kiryll's *organizational identity* is rather weak: he never mentioned the name of his company in an interview.

Talking about the historical aspect, the Soviet past and current authoritarian regime in the country have the biggest impact among historical events on the cultural identity of Belarusians which can be seen through Hofstede's value dimensions. They provided very high Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance scores (95 out of 100), which means that people are used to hierarchical order, feel an emotional need for strict rules and status is very important for them. However, in the professional's company, the main rule is to make as few rules as possible: there is no strict dress code or decided lunch hours, holidays are always celebrated in the office as in the family circle. For the recipient, there is no difference in communicating with people of the lower, higher or same rank. Based on this, we can conclude that Kiryll does not implement a classic Belarusian managerial scheme. As mentioned above, the company's traditions also prove that Belarus is a collectivist culture which is to some extent secured by the communist past experience. The professional also mentioned the company's traditions of giving personal presents, decorating the office together, which reflects the femininity of Belarusian culture, characterized by the value of equality, solidarity, and quality of working life (Hofstede Insight, 2021).



1.3. *Analysis: Hanna Johnsson*

Hanna Johnsson is a 33-year-old Swedish Coffee Shop Manager (CSM) who has five years' worth of experience of working in the coffee industry. All these five years have been spent working at the multinational enterprise (MNE) Espresso House (EH), though under different titles. The company welcomes employees from various cultures and backgrounds including foreigners who do not speak the national language, partially with the intention of getting them more involved in the Swedish culture and society.

By referring to Turner's identity categories theory, we can analyze the business professional's different aspects of social identities. (Turner, Reynolds, 2012). In terms of *gender identity*, Hanna defines herself as a female. The company she works for, Espresso House, does not have a woman quota nor do they reject any *ethnicities*. Instead, they look more towards the individual's personal identity rather than their gender identification. This can be in terms of working skills, personality, language skills and more. Furthermore, EH must also look at the person's *national identity*, especially for foreigners who are not accustomed to the Swedish culture and society and therefore may behave significantly differently from the Swedish norms. To tackle this, EH works to educate foreign workers on Swedish culture by involving them more deeply in Swedish society with the help of their Swedish workers. Considering the fact that Hanna identifies herself to have a strong Swedish identity, she is able to educate those, who have a different national identity, in the Swedish culture and norms.

Hanna also has a strong *regional identity* with Kalmar, mainly because she was born and raised there. This was noticed during the interview as she spoke with a distinct regional accent. However, her regional identity does not outweigh her national identity since she would continuously refer to herself as a "Swedish" person in general, indicating that she does not separate herself from the rest of the country. Therefore, she does not feel the need to behave differently with businesspeople outside of her region compared to those within.

During the interview Hanna would multiple times mention the company's name, Espresso House, when describing her work life. Meaning that the employees will identify themselves rather with the EH group than just their individual self, as described in Hofstede's value dimensions of a *collectivistic culture*. (Samovar et al, 2017). Considering these factors, it can



be concluded that Hanna has a strong *organizational identity* as she follows the company's culture.

1.4. Analysis: Sriram Krishnan

Sriram Krishnan was born in 1983 and grew up in Chennai, India from where he immigrated to the United States in 2005. He worked as a product creator for successful companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, Snap, and Twitter. Nowadays, he is a partner of a16z, working as an investor as well as creator and host on clubhouse of "The Good Time Show". However, in our following analysis, we will focus on his employment at Microsoft (Sriram Krishnan, 7 August 2021; Silicon Valley Girl, 7 August 2021; Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021).

First, we will take a closer look at Sriram Krishnan's identities following Turner's Identity Theory in order to underline the impact of those on his work life and environment. Second, we will compare India and the U.S. along with categories of Hofstede's Value Dimensions based on Sriram Krishnan's descriptions.

From the beginning of the interview, Sriram Krishnan mentions his Indian roots. It is unmistakable that in the first part of the interview the listener gets the sense that his *national identity* strongly belongs to India, where he grew up in a lower-middle-class family in a very "traditional Indian household" as he calls it (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021).

However, further into the interview (of the 12th of August in 2021), the listener has the feeling that his national identity perspective changes. Despite demonstrating that India continues to play a big role in his life by, for instance, encouraging young Indians to show their talents or by saying that he is proud of the economic development of his home country, he begins to mention his naturalization process to the American culture and society. This process includes difficult and energy-draining green card/visa processes which he, however, successfully conquered thanks to Microsoft's undeniable support. For instance, his mention of the memorable quote "Welcome home." (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021) (which an airport employee said to him when he returned to America from India) greatly underlines the importance for him to finally become an American citizen and gain an American identity. Nevertheless, he also mentions other difficulties he faced on his first time abroad including not



having money, lack of knowledge about cultural differences, and experiences. For example, the situation when he did not know how to cross the street since traffic lights were unknown to him. Nonetheless, in the end, he describes the finishing process of naturalization in the USA and starting to feel at home, whereas we can see that his national identity might be divided into partly American as well as Indian identity which leads to his ability to have multifaceted viewpoints. To give an example, he shows a lot of empathy for other immigrants or cultural differences and always tries to see something positive in everybody (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021; Silicon Valley Girl, 7 August 2021; Andreessen, 2021).

By already mentioning Microsoft above, we come to another one of Sriram Krishnan's strong portrayed identities in the interview which is his *organizational identity*. During the interview, he mentions Microsoft uncountable times and describes it not only as a working space but also as a home and protector. He underlines and explains that Microsoft enabled him to come to America, supporting him the whole way and giving him many possibilities and options to grow. He senses the feeling that Microsoft believed in him by, for instance, helping him to finish college, giving him responsibility and liberty on working with different products. Regarding different cultures working at Microsoft, he highlights the diversity of cultures and religions and how everybody was working side by side no matter where they came from. As a result of Sriram Krishnan working in an American environment, he is able to see differences in the Indian environment especially regarding *collectivism/individualism* and *low/high power distance*. First of all, concerning collectivism/individualism he portrays India as a more collectivist culture agreeing with Hofstede's score of 48 by describing the lines between work and family as much "blurrier than in the U.S." (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021). Contrary to that, he faced in America the absolute opposite, in his new job at Microsoft he barely socially interacted with his colleagues (his work life and private life have/had completely different social circles and dynamics) matching Hofstede's score of 91 concerning individualism (in the U.S.) (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021; Hofstede Insight [U.S.], 2021; Silicon Valley Girl, 7 August 2021).

Another aspect of the Hofstede model is the *power distance*. Krishnan directly emphasized the difference there since in the U.S. there is not a lot of deference to authority and the power gap is lower than in India, agreeing with Hofstede's calculation (e.g., India: 77; United States: 40 according to Hofstede) (Hofstede Insight [U.S. and India], 2021). Sriram Krishnan emphasizes



that it is expected and highly valued to talk back honestly as well as communicate with more clarity since people “take you by your word” (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021) in America. For instance, it is common to meet CEOs and other managers on the same level and the environment is not so hierarchical (e.g., he met Bill Gates multiple times working at Microsoft) (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021).

Whereas, in India, Sriram Krishnan underlines the large power gap, you don’t want to say no often nor speak your mind since that would lead to disappointment due to the Indian high-context communication culture (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021).

2. Partnership project: Greeting behaviour, Challenges and Solutions

2.1. Hello greeting behaviour

In the interview with Hanna, she says that in a business meeting she would greet her vis-à-vis with a handshake, maintain eye contact, and she refers to them by their first name. She adds that welcoming gifts are not necessary in her company’s culture and that she aims to find a middle ground between the cultures norms when meeting with other professionals. For instance, when her vis-à-vis would highly appreciate being called by their last name, it would not be a problem for her. At the end of the interview, she also emphasizes the importance of positive body language towards her such as an open smile since that could influence the outcome of the negotiation.

When we compare Kyrill Shumsky’s answers to the same questions, we can not overlook many similarities. Equally to Hanna, he places a lot of importance on the “no gift” policy as well as greeting his business partner with a handshake, maintaining direct eye contact, and looking at his vis-à-vis with an open and warm smile. However, contrary to Hanna, he is welcoming his business partner by calling them by their last name including possible titles. All in all, this is the only factor in which they differentiate.

However, Sriram Krishnan’s possible behavior in a business meeting is not as easy to conduct as with the aforementioned professionals since we were not able to execute a personal interview. However, since Sriram works in the U.S. since 2005 as well as in an American



company, he will most likely interact as an American businessman not as an Indian. The U.S. American business etiquette has a great part of intersection with the two other business professionals and includes greeting their business partner both with a handshake and, usually, a smile. Equally to the Swedish business etiquette, American businessmen/businesswomen are “often quickly on a first-name basis” (Zachvieja, 2017) and direct eye contact during the conversation is a very important rule (Zachvieja, 2017).

2.2. Challenges and Solutions: Kyrill Shumsky

Belarusian people have a national trait called “pamyarkounast”. This concept does not have a translation to any other languages and does not exist in any other cultures. However, its understanding is crucial for the comprehension of Belarusian culture and, accordingly, the style of communication. “Pamyarkounast” combines such concepts as complaisance, moderation, compliance, patience, conformity, and tolerance. In other words, it means that on any terms Belarusian will try to avoid any potential conflicts or clashes of interests.

However, during the business meeting, Kyrill might face several challenges related to the strong organizational identities of two other professionals: both Hanna and Sriram tightly associate themselves with the companies they are working for. This fact might be incomprehensible or sometimes even a bit annoying for him. There is no doubt that Kyrill would manage to tolerate that, nevertheless, he could politely mention that the three of them should focus more on the common project than on their “home” companies.

Another challenge that might arise is a misperception of non-verbal behavior or, more precisely, of silence. For both Swedish (Welanders, Astvik and Isaksson, 2019, pp.89-90) and Indian (Jain and Matukumalli, 2013, pp.252-254) cultures making pauses and keeping silent for some time in the conversation is considered normal. However, for a Belarusian, it usually seems awkward and might look like a sign of indifference. In this case, Kyrill should learn in advance about the peculiarities of non-verbal behavior for the other cultures.

Lastly, the language barrier. As the communication between professionals would happen in English, Kyrill might struggle to convey his thoughts due to his poor English skills. In this case,



we would recommend Kiryll to prepare in advance the translation of his ideas in English, learn some specific words related to the topic or retain the services of an interpreter.

2.3. Challenges and Solutions: Hanna Johnsson

Swedish people are known for showing politeness and respect to others, both in their verbal and non-verbal communication with others. Especially with the people who they are not close with in order to not seem rude and to reduce the risk of any conflict arising since Swedes dislike any form of confrontation, unless deemed necessary. If that is the case, “they will often address the conflict or confrontation directly, yet diplomatically” (Cultural Atlas, 2022).

Hanna incorporates this cultural trait when communicating with others and therefore, in a meeting with other business professionals it is unlikely for conflict to arise due to poor communication skills. However, the language barrier between the three business professionals may cause misunderstandings between them. To tackle this issue, Hanna should revise how people of the other professionals’ culture communicate and prepare how she should communicate to avoid misunderstandings.

Another aspect of communication is how one interrupts somebody who is currently speaking. According to Swedish culture, as well as most Western cultures, when a person is repeatedly being interrupted in a conversation “it is thought to indicate that one does not have a genuine interest in what the other is saying” (Cultural Atlas, 2022). Sometimes it is considered rude since the other person is not being allowed to finish their sentences. However, in the Indian culture, as well as in other Asian cultures, it is normal for people to interrupt each other in a conversation. Therefore, in a business meeting it is crucial for Hanna to in advance be aware of this significant difference in their cultures to avoid misunderstandings. Though this is not very likely to happen considering the fact that Sriram is familiar with the American culture (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021). This difference in their interpretation of an interruption is related to their national identity where Hanna identifies herself as Swedish and Sriram as more American, as previously mentioned in the analysis of these professionals.



2.4. Challenges and Solutions: Sriram Krishnan

From the perspective that Sriram Krishnan's Microsoft background, in this case, is his most important asset in the common business venture of the three professionals, Krishnan would likely come across and conduct himself as an American business actor, as his experience in the company comes from an international, mostly U.S. environment (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021). Although strong differences exist in his past Indian culture, if compared to Johnsson's Swedish background and Shumsky's Belarusian one, Krishnan's U.S. approach to the negotiations would be more familiar to them than his Indian.

It can be drawn from the interview (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021), that Krishnan has adapted to the American culture of low-context, high substance communication. This means that he gets his message across the way he says it, without subtext that could be hard to interpret (Samovar et al, 2017, p. 239). Krishnan could easily find a common language with Hanna, as her Swedish communicational culture is similar to the U.S. one. (Samovar et al, 2017, p. 246). While differences might exist in-between the U.S. and Belarus' way of conducting a negotiation, it will not necessarily lead to misunderstandings. The matters discussed would likely be practical and therefore, the conversation would need to have a strong substance regardless of the communication style.

However, Krishnan's arguably high individualistic traits, which can be traced to his personal history (personal efforts to succeed in his field, for example being self-taught in coding, finding his way to the United States, etc.) might distance him from his partners. Compared to Krishnan, both of his partners come from less individualistic societies than the U.S. As seen in the difference of the individuality scores (91 for the U.S, 71 for Sweden, 25 for Belarus) on Hofstede's country comparison (Hofstede Insights, 2022), the difference between the U.S. and Sweden is small, but the gap between the U.S. score and Belarus score is wider. Consequently, this could lead to differing views from Krishnan's and Shumsky's personal perspectives. Despite possible differences, a functional end-result is beneficial to all parties and is what the negotiations would strive towards.



2.5. Goodbye greeting behaviour

A pleasant and proper goodbye is of importance since too this is a part of the meeting. According to what previously has been said about the different business professionals, it gives the impression that they have an underlying understanding of different cultures and the fact that their different behaviors affect their perception. Consequently, this would make it easier to find common ground. Krishnan will, as previously stated, probably have a more American approach when conducting business including his “hello” and “goodbye” greeting behavior. In other words, shake hands with his newly found partner with a bright smile (Silicon Valley Girl, 12 August 2021; Silicon Valley Girl, 7 August 2021). Hanna and Kiryll would respond in a similar way considering their cultures’ norms. If there is no disrespectful remark done, there is no reason to suspect the meeting will end badly due to the similarities of their greeting behaviors.

To conclude, it is important for the different professionals to be aware of different cultural aspects influencing communication behavior and to be prepared for possible occurring difficulties during intercultural communication. Moreover, it is crucial to treat the business partner with respect and empathy. By respecting differences, acting openminded, a successful business negotiation can lead to a long enriching business relationship (Samovar et al, 2017, p.403-406).

3. Reflections

During the work on the project, I was lucky to interview and analyze the cultural characteristics of Kiryll Shumsky – a representative of my own culture. Throughout this process I was always (sometimes subconsciously) applying all the theories and concepts to myself, comparing myself to him. And that is interesting, how different sometimes the results were.

For example, talking about national identity, I, unlike him, do really separate myself from Russians and Ukrainians. I still perceive those two nationalities as “relatives” to Belarusians, however, I would never use the pronoun “us” when talking about them. I think that could be



explained by the fact that I was born and raised in a post-soviet period, so I do not have the actual memory of a common state.

Another aspect that surprised me is that Kiryll does not feel any distinction in communicating with people from Minsk or any other cities – for me it is quite different. Like an examined professional, I was born and grew up in Minsk and until entering the university did not have a lot of chances to communicate with people from other regions of Belarus. However, after a couple of weeks of my first semester, I was surprised how difficult it might be to have an effective communication with the inhabitants of other parts of the country, even though Belarus is quite small, and we don't have any linguistic variations. I needed some time to adjust to their manners, perceptions of life and non-verbal communication.

Thereafter, analyzing Hofstede's value dimensions made me realize how much have they changed for Belarusian culture since the beginning of protests in summer 2020 – I believe that the data was collected before this turning point in my country's history and will be very different after the next upgrade. In 2019, I would describe myself and my nation as very tolerant to the hierarchical order, rigid codes, strict rules, and regulations, I would say that Uncertainty Avoidance used to be one of our main cultural values. But, as we know from the historical experience, every tolerance has its own limits – and ours were violated in summer 2020. Me and, in my opinion, my country will not sacrifice our desires and needs just for the uncertainty avoidance anymore. I believe, after the next update of data about Belarusian value dimensions this and Power Distance scores will be much lower. In contrary, I am sure that Collectivism and Femininity scores will still remain high or even become higher, as, in my opinion, during these difficult times Belarusians became more loyal, solidary, and empathic to each other. Of course, I can not say for the whole nation, but I can say for myself, and I think that it is quite interesting how with the help of Hofstede's dimensions you can track the process of change happening inside a culture.



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