Intercultural Competence in Work: A Case Study in Eastern Finnish Enterprises

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This paper presents the research results of a study that focused on intercultural interaction issues in private sector workplaces in Eastern Finland. The results show that the current challenges caused by the globalisation pressures in the realm of economics behoves work communities to review their personnel training and management practices: the work communities as a whole should be helped to deal with increasing cultural diversity. Although the number of workers with foreign backgrounds has increased in Eastern Finland, so far, there have been only a few attempts to restructure the working practices in an effort to take into account the demands of increasingly diverse working contexts. In all participating companies the mainstream people were the norm. It was common that Finnish language proficiency was seen as a necessary but not yet sufficient qualification for work. In addition, knowledge of the practices of Finnish working life, as well as training and working experience acquired in Finland were desired.

Key Words: cultural diversity, intercultural competence, private sector work, East Finland

JEL *Classification:* F, A

Introduction

It is obvious that the large-scale international movement of labour is one of the future challenges caused by the globalisation pressures in the realm of economics. Peter Koehn (2006, 22) writes: 'Looking forward the future, the most likely population scenario will involve more people, more population movement, more displacement – both internally and internationally . . .' (see also Helton 2002, 14). Labour migration, in particular, is becoming increasingly global due to the economic restructuring which is making hanging onto a job everywhere precarious (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 227). On the other hand, in many Western countries, an ageing population means that there will be a shortage of labour. A cross-border movement of labour provides many opportunities but it also entails many challenges. In work communities, the emergence of national and cultural diversity may lead to divergent working practices and

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provoke confusing or even conflicting interaction situations. This paper seeks to provide empirically validated knowledge that is needed to enhance prerequisites for successful intercultural interaction in culturally diverse workplaces.

The everyday experiences of intercultural work will be reported by the managers and personnel of ten Eastern Finnish private sector enterprises. Eastern Finland represents a traditionally ethno-culturally homogeneous region currently characterized by increasing multinational economic collaboration and international mobility of labour: today the companies are finding themselves more and more involved in situations where people from diverse national and/or cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages are working side by side. Demographic pressures have an important part to play here. It is expected that by the end of the current decade an insufficient work-force will be a real problem in Finland as the baby boomer generations born after World War II reach the age of retirement (Forsander 2002; Forsander et al. 2004). It is anticipated that this generational shift will take place in Finland earlier than in other European countries, and in eastern (and northern) parts of Finland earlier than in the rest of the country.

Even now, many Eastern Finnish companies are increasingly seeking qualified professionals from abroad in order to replace ageing employees. According to a survey focusing on the experiences of intercultural work among private sector managers (Pitkänen and Atjonen 2002; 2003),[1] almost half of the Eastern Finnish managers estimate that there will be a need for targeted foreign labour force recruitment by the end of the present decade. The survey also revealed that today the Eastern Finnish private enterprises are typically rather monocultural by nature. It was quite uncommon for a company to employ foreign personnel. On the other hand, quite a number of enterprises did have diverse and extensive international co-operation.

At the same time as the recruitment of foreign labour is seen as a partial solution to finding qualified workers, about 40 percent of the immigrants living in the eastern parts of Finland, especially refugees and so-called ethnic return migrants from the former Soviet Union,[2] are unemployed (Pitkänen and Atjonen 2002; Pitkänen and Hacklin 2005). Moreover, it has been observed that if immigrants do find employment, they are likely to be placed in the lower echelons of the labour market hierarchy. Advancing to a job that corresponds to one's education and work experience is especially difficult for first generation immigrants who suffer

from a lack of Finnish language proficiency and the cultural competencies needed in Finnish working life. (Forsander and Alitolppa-Niitamo 2000; Forsander 2002; Pitkänen and Hacklin 2005.)

Despite the increase in the number of foreign residents in Finland, very little is known about how to learn to work together with people from other countries (and cultures), and how the employees of foreign origin can be helped to adapt to their new work environments. The way intercultural interaction and collaboration succeeds is of central importance in striving to alleviate the impending labour shortage by making use of the human potential, both of the foreigners who are already in the country and of those recruited from abroad. It has become apparent that the increase in cultural diversity is giving way to work environments in which the training and management practices of the past no longer function. This paper presents a study focusing on the recognition of cultural diversity in working contexts, and on the current needs for personnel training in enhancing intercultural competence in work. The key question addressed was as follows: What kind of experiences and attitudes are there among private sector managers, human resource management (HRM) personnel, and employees of foreign or Finnish background towards cultural diversity in the work community? I will start by introducing the context of the study and by discussing the different dimensions of intercultural competence. Then I will introduce the research procedure and the main research results. Finally, the discussion section will summarise the paper.

The Context of the Study

In order to understand the research context, it is crucial to remember that when other Western European countries, from the 1950s to the 1970s, attracted labour migrants to their factories and later on into the service sector, Finland was virtually untouched by immigration. However, since the 1990s, the relative number of immigrants has increased in Finland more rapidly than in any other Western European state. (Paananen 1999, 46; Lepola 2000, 23–24.) While in the middle of the 1970s the total number of foreign citizens living in Finland was around 10,000, at the end of 2006 the number was almost 122,000. Only eight percent of all the foreign residents in Finland are living in the eastern provinces (North and South Karelia, North and South Savo, and Kainuu), whereas around half of them have settled in or near the Helsinki area. Accordingly, while the percentage of foreign citizens in the whole population in Helsinki is

eight, in the eastern regions it is only one (in the whole country the percentage is almost three). (Pitkänen and Hacklin 2005; see the Population Register Centre web site, http://www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi.)

Not only has the number of immigrants changed but also the policy regarding their reception. Until the late 1990s, the predominant ideology underlying the Finnish immigration policy was *assimilationist,* with the expectancy that members of ethnic minority groups should become culturally absorbed and be indistinguishable from the mainstream of Finnish social and cultural life. In recent years, the general principles of the Finnish system for receiving immigrants have undergone a significant change. In 1997, the Finnish government ratified the Programme on Immigration and Refugee policy. According to the programme, *pluralism* is being viewed as the goal for integrating foreign newcomers. This implies that while sharing the values and norms of the mainstream culture foreign residents should have an opportunity to maintain and develop their own cultural characteristics. At the same time, they should have equal opportunities to participate in the economic and social life of the host society. (Matinheikki-Kokko and Pitkänen 2002, 48–73; see the Finlex web site, http://www.finlex.fi.)

So far, immigration to Finland has mainly come through marriage, humanitarian reasons, or the so-called ethnic return migration, whereas labour migrants have made up a significantly smaller group than in most other industrialized countries. However, an ageing population means that there are demands for labour force which can partially be met by work-related migration. This has created a need to revise Finnish immigration policy. In October 2006, the Finnish Government approved a new Immigration Policy Programme. The purpose of the programme is to actively promote work-related immigration, in particularly from outside the European Union and European economic area. The programme also emphasises the utilisation of the existing labour force in conjunction with the development of work-related immigration policy. Moreover, politics of difference have been introduced in which people's rights to their ethnicity, cultural heritage and language are part of everyone's human rights. The aim is to promote the development of a pluralistic, multicultural and non-discriminatory society (see the Ministry of Labour web site, http://www.mol.fi).

Likewise in Eastern Finland, targeted foreign labour recruitment is arriving on the public agenda (see the Regional Council of Pohjois-Savo region web site, http://www.pohjois-savo.fi). All the eastern provinces,

North Karelia, South Karelia, North Savo, South Savo and Kainuu, are located near the Russian border. Accordingly, the largest group of immigrants consists of people of Russian background; more than half of the foreigners living on the area are Russian-speaking. Most of them have come to Finland for family reasons, or they are Ingrians and thus regarded as returnee migrants. Other newcomers are of Estonian and Swedish origin (mostly returnees), or humanitarian migrants coming mainly from Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Afghanistan. (See the Register Office web site, http://www.maistraatti.fi; Pitkänen and Hacklin 2005.)

Regarding the forthcoming demographic shift in Eastern Finland, the age structure among the foreigners living in the area is very auspicious: the share of working age population (15–64 years) is almost 80 percent. Besides, their educational background is in many cases very good: many of them have university degrees or intermediate grade qualifications. Even so, almost half of them are unemployed. Immigrants of Russian origin form the largest group of jobseekers: in 2004 more than half of all job applicants were Russian-speaking immigrants. (Pitkänen and Hacklin 2005.)

According to Pitkänen and Atjonen (2002) the main stumbling blocks in the employment of foreigners can be found at the attitudinal level. The above-mentioned survey among Eastern Finnish managers showed that, although the managers' experiences of foreign employees were mainly positive, negative experiences and attitudes were also expressed, mainly with reference to Russian-speaking employees. The most favoured groups of foreigners for employment include migrants from Scandinavian or Western European countries, Estonia or the US, while employees with Russian or African backgrounds were the least welcome. (Pitkänen and Atjonen 2002, 37–43.)

Learning to Become Interculturally Competent

In studying the challenges caused by cultural diversity at work, we need to be able to understand what processes come into play when people with different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. It is obvious that intercultural interaction as an everyday experience requires special competence to manage anxiety caused by cultural differences in interaction with people who see the world from perspectives which may be different or even in conflict with one's own personal values and beliefs. Firstly, a necessary, though insufficient, ingredient of intercultural competence is the acquisition of cultural[3] knowledge. Knowledge is a form

of cultural capital, and its possession empowers. One of the greatest resources and sources of empowerment is access to the kind of knowledge that is culturally accurate and has instrumental value when put into practise.

Further, in a culturally diverse environment, there is a need for critical self-reflection. This entails familiarity with foreign cultures, but also an awareness of one's own cultural starting points. Culture can be regarded as a mental set of windows through which all of life is viewed. It varies from individual to individual within a cultural context, but shares important characteristics with its members. In particular, culture is not something we are born with, but rather it is *learned.* If culture is learned, then it is also *learnable.* Much of what is learned about one's own culture is stored in mental categories that are recalled only when they are challenged by something different. But how do the windows differ from culture to culture? The following question arises: How can an outsider learn to recognise what is essentially transparent to the individual member of a culture? (Beamer and Varner 2001, 3.)

Jack Mezirow (1991) states that a process of questioning basic cultural assumptions and habitual expectations is possible by examining why and how we constrain the way we see ourselves and other people. This self-reflection can result in altered meaning perspectives. This kind of change or revised interpretation of cultural ways is often the result of efforts to understand different cultures with customs that contradict our own presuppositions. When we have an experience which cannot be assimilated into our meaning perspectives, either the experience is rejected or the perspective changes to accommodate the new experience. When we change significant meaning structures, i. e., our meaning perspectives, we change the way we view, and act toward, the world. Mezirow believes that this process may lead to a more inclusive world view. (Mezirow 1991, 168; see also Taylor 1994.)

Although necessary, the awareness of cultural multiplicity and diversity is not yet sufficient for true intercultural competence, but these skills have to be underscored by ethical consideration and cultural sensitivity. To achieve all this, there is a need for intercultural dialogue in which the reasonableness and validity of different life forms are being judged and examined. (Bennett 1995, 259–265.) Intercultural encounters are by their nature phenomena which contain numerous variables and are difficult to predict. These often include the ability for managing anxiety caused by cultural differences in interaction with colleagues who see the world

from perspectives which may be different from or even in conflict with one's own personal values and beliefs.

Research Procedure

The study presented here focused on ten Eastern Finnish private sector enterprises with personnel from different ethnic backgrounds.[4] The general character was a qualitative *case study* approach to attain an understanding of the characteristics of intercultural encounters in work. The group of respondents consisted of managers and HR managers ($n = 13$),[5] as well as of employees of foreign origin ($n = 14$) and their Finnish colleagues ($n = 11$). The relations between employees and their supervisors were a focus of examination, along with peer relations among employees.

The research data were gathered in 2003–2004 through semi-structured interviews in two large, five middle size and three small companies.[6] The participating workplaces represented industrial and service branch enterprises (catering business, supermarkets). The foreigners working in the companies were mainly of Russian origin. The list of other countries of origin included mainly European (Poland, Romania, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands) and African (Ghana, Somalia) countries. The number of foreign personnel in the companies taking part in the study varied between 1 and 7.

The interviewing style was structured when answers were sought to common questions covering the experiences, attitudinal engagement and activities of the respondents. The respondents, however, were encouraged to express themselves freely while the general direction and shape of the interviews was maintained. The key questions addressed were as follows: What are the goals and prevailing practices of the company's strategy for managing cultural diversity? What are the experienced and expected advantages and challenges related to the increase in national/cultural diversity? Further, in order to find out how different actors in the work environments can learn to become interculturally competent, I aimed to discover what kind of culturally based conceptions and practices the participants of diverse intercultural encountering situations adhere to. Have they experienced culturally conflicting situations? What are the origins of these conflicts? How have the conflict situations been (or should have been) solved? The final aim was to find out what kind of personnel training would be needed in order to attain the intercultural competence relevant in culturally diverse private sector workplaces.

Experiences of Intercultural Work

In this present study, language difficulties and communication issues in general appeared to be the factors most clearly complicating the daily interaction and collaboration in culturally diverse companies, especially in small and middle size customer services. Some managerial respondents were also afraid of intercultural misunderstandings, as customers had complained of the poor Finnish language skills by employees of foreign origin. On the other hand, they appreciated the ability of foreign personnel to use their mother tongues; e. g., the employees of Russian background were used as interpreters and translators. Moreover, for the service branch, questions like politeness, etiquette, hierarchy, and so on, appeared to be the major challenges (cf. Hofstede, 1997), while in the large industrial companies used to operating in wide international contexts the workers' familiarity with foreign countries was seen as an entirely valuable asset. These companies had lots of experiences of foreign personnel and were used to dealing with intercultural communication issues in their day-to-day work. As the following quotation shows, etiquette or other formality issues did not cause any major problems:

> What comes to mind is that often your first association on these multicultural issues is the etiquette. Are you allowed to bow now and nod and shake hands and what kind of flowers and everything, so all that has like lost its meaning.
>
> *Male* HR *manager, large industrial enterprise*

Still, among employees of foreign background, politeness and hierarchy were felt to be confusing in the relations between managers and their subordinates. Knowing when it was appropriate to address the managers formally was especially difficult for many newcomers; they were not used to calling their superiors by their first names. A position where the superior was a female person was embarrassing to those male employees originally from countries with different gender roles than in Finland. In some cases, male employees had felt it was difficult to work under female managers.

Although in some cases the use of religious symbols had caused confusion, most respondents estimated that different religious backgrounds did not have any special effects on the everyday collaboration. Instead, headaches often mentioned were the adherence to given schedules and the conceptions of time in general (cf. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 295–343; Trompenaars 1995, 21–28). Further, the employees'

attitudes towards hygiene had caused trouble for managerial respondents; in some cases, foreign employees were characterized as untidy. On the other hand, those managers who had been living abroad might evaluate the excessive cleanliness among Finnish personnel very critically. A manager (catering business) who had been working abroad for several years was disturbed by the excessive cleanliness of employees of Finnish origin: 'In Finnish restaurants we have some kind of cleaning mentality. Like, I should clean this place! So I have said that Finnish people are too much dish-oriented while they should be client-oriented.'

Almost all the managerial representatives of the participating companies highlighted the importance of adapting the proficiency of foreign labour to fit into Finnish working life. Many of them seemed to have suspicions of foreign qualifications and exams. As a consequence, in almost all companies taking part in the study the employees of foreign origin were over-qualified for their present tasks. Some kind of mistrust indicates the fact that, in almost all cases, the foreign workers had started their work as trainees. These research results concur with earlier studies conducted in Finland. According to the studies carried out by Paananen (1999), Forsander and Alitolppa-Niitamo (2000), Forsander (2002), and Pitkänen and Atjonen (2002), the market-value of work experience and education acquired abroad is rather low in Finland. Instead, working experience attained in Finland is very valuable when trying to convince an employer of the adequacy of a foreigner. Thus, as Forsander and Alitolppa-Niitamo (2000) stress, training jobs and other 'entry jobs' are very important first steps in the career of a foreigner: in order to obtain employment that corresponds to his/her education and previous work experience a foreigner needs to acquire working experience attained in Finland.

However, there is a high risk that these 'entry jobs' will become permanent. Also in the present study, some employees of foreign origin reported such experiences. Some of their comments were very critical; especially employees originally from Western European countries were very dissatisfied with their careers. These persons had come to Finland for family reasons, and were not different from Finns in external appearance. Nevertheless they had experienced discrimination or even racism either in their workplaces or in Finnish society. A male employee from the Netherlands characterised his experiences as 'racism you cannot see but you can feel'. His frustration was exacerbated by the fact that the company had hardly ever utilised his language skills, education or pre-

vious work experience. Another male respondent, originally from Italy, complained that after working in the same company for twenty years he advised and counselled his younger Finnish colleagues, but still got a lower salary than those youngsters who just had graduated. He was bitter when a Finn, who had been working in the company for a much shorter time than he, was chosen as his new boss. Actually, it appeared that in many cases a Finnish worker was seen as a model for a good employee, and a foreign employee was supposed to be like a Finn (cf. Paananen 1999, 127; Alasuutari and Ruuska 1999, 199–214; Anttonen 1998). No wonder that some newcomers tried to be more Finnish than their Finnish colleagues. This was especially common among Ingrians, who often look like Finns and can speak Finnish. Further, these respondents believed that also other foreigners should assimilate into the Finnish way of life.

When the managerial respondents assessed foreign personnel they often accentuated 'proper' *[oikea]* personal characteristics and a 'proper' attitude toward the work. When they used the word 'proper', they referred to an ethnically Finnish person: to something normal and natural, to something that required no further explanations:

> The attitude must be proper. Must be properly oriented at attitudinal level, meaning that you truly want to work.
>
> *Male manager, medium-sized department store*

Edward Hall points out in his book *Beyond Culture* (1977) that the closer something is to seeming true, the less aware we probably are of its cultural origin. Our own culture seems normal to us; it is just the way things are. Here seems to be hidden a major challenge for the participating companies: Finnishness is *implicitly* seen as a norm. The role of cultural self-evidences is of crucial importance here. It is extremely difficult for a person who has immigrated to Finland to identify such culturally based self-evidences. It is also possible that the mainstream personnel do not see these difficulties at all; they do not understand that people with different cultural backgrounds may see issues in different ways. As long as everything goes in a traditional way, the familiar daily routines do not call for any change and, thus, for additional mental resources. (Lehtonen, Löytty and Ruuska 2004, 142.) The situation is different when cultural diversity increases in the work community. Not only newcomers but also the mainstream people are involved in an acculturation process which may be felt to be more or less stressful. A common reason for this stress is that, due to the change, there is a need for both learning and discarding

learning: 'learning off' what one has learned during the initial enculturation process (Pitkänen 2005, 141–144).

In fact, one new member of the community with a different cultural background already creates a need to review the traditional working practices. Some colleagues may consider foreign newcomers troublesome for this very reason: the newcomers disturb the easiness which their cultural self-evidences entail. If these familiarities are shaken one can try to bear up by clinging to the old and familiar (Lehtonen et al. 2004, 142, 175–176). One way of asking questions is to notice that another culture goes about things differently from the way we expect. Sometimes a newcomer with a marginal point of view may help the mainstream people to perceive and interpret a phenomenon in a way which helps to see their blind spots (see Forsander et al. 2004, 47–48, 71; Hall 1997).

In order to intervene in puzzling situations, there is a need to perceive, and maybe anticipate, the circumstances that may cause stumbling blocks for intercultural interaction. It seems that if the participants in interaction situations come from very different cultures, there is a high likelihood that their initial understanding of that event will differ. As a consequence, the behaviours evoked by these situational representations are likely to differ, so that the participants' responses to the same behaviour setting may disconfirm one another's expectations. Coordinating behaviour effectively becomes difficult, and attention must be shifted towards negotiating shared meanings about the situation if the relationship is to continue. (Smith and Bond 1993, 176.) The first step in effective intercultural learning is the understanding and acceptance of differences. This does not mean we have to agree with another's cultural viewpoint, or that we have to adopt the values of another culture. Rather, it means that we need to examine our priorities and determine how we all can best work together, being different. (Hall 1977; Beamer and Varner 2001, 5.)

Nonetheless, we should not ignore the persons' own responsibility for their performance. We are both similar *and* different: we share several capacities and needs, but different cultural backgrounds as well as individual characteristics define and structure them differently. Thus, people do not fail in their work because of mere cultural differences or succeed because they share the culture or language of the dominant group. Individual factors are also important. Some representatives of the participating companies pointed out that immigrants or ethnic minorities do not comprise any homogeneous groups, rather when assessing people's personal characteristics one should take into consideration the similarities

and differences both between and within the groups (cf. Lehtonen and Löytty 2003, 7–13). Besides, when talking about national backgrounds some respondents mentioned that personal characteristics are not determined by national or ethnic borders. An HR manager of a large industrial enterprise stated that foreign workers are individuals just like Finnish workers. He said:

> Sometimes they might be considered as personal characteristics. Saying that he is from there, labelling him according to his background, even if as a Finn he could be the same, who knows. But if the person is a bit extraordinary, people say that it's because he is from there.

Some HR managers assumed that the foreign employees have, and *should* have capacities and characteristics they felt were missing among Finnish staff, like a positive attitude and language skills. Asked what kind of foreigner he should employ, the manager of a supermarket answered: 'Well, I would expect and demand the same qualities as from a Finn, an employee of Finnish origin. And then, what else he can offer in addition to that is of course, his language skills.' Ethnically and culturally diverse personnel could also be seen as a valuable resource. The research showed that some managers had experienced that an ethnically and culturally diverse staff can, at its best, function as a *primus motor* for innovative processes, as different practices and habits can open their eyes for new kinds of opportunities. The HR manager of a large industrial company was convinced that the recruitment of culturally diverse staff had resulted in an increased number of innovations:

> I would see that it's just a big advantage having people who think in a different way. Automatically it gives like a positive opportunity to learn something new, to get something developed or something like that to be done. Already the fact of calling into question the job we're currently doing. Often these kinds of things start new development projects.

Especially in those large companies which were operating internationally, multinational personnel was seen as a resource to develop the prerequisites for international activities. The managerial respondents also mentioned other benefits due to the increasing foreign staff. It was mentioned that language skills and cultural awareness had improved among the whole personnel. Some said that service-mindedness had increased with the growing multinational and multicultural personnel. Especially

in the service branch, the multicultural personnel were primarily assessed from an image-centred perspective. The manager of a middle-size supermarket which characterized itself as 'youthful, fresh and reformist' was convinced that, in the eyes of their customers, foreign personnel were 'such a great asset'. Instead, according to the representative of another unit of the same company the attitude towards foreign staff was clearly more doubtful. The following quotation shows that the working context and potential focus groups were seen as crucial points:

> If we're thinking about the fact that we are living in an area with high unemployment rates, one can be thinking that I am unemployed here and there's a that kind of person working, a foreigner. Has he taken my hours, my bread [. . .] What are, like, the clients' slants on foreigners and so their, like, bitterness towards them, caused by the high unemployment rates of the area.

It is obvious that the increase in cultural diversity is giving way to new work environments in which the management practices of the past no longer function. In their daily work, managers and HRM personnel need to give additional support to foreign and ethnic minority personnel. This may be necessary in order to equalise them with the rest and to integrate them into their work organisations as well as into the host society. Training is also a strategically important sphere in the work of providing people with equal opportunities for their future. But first of all, successful intercultural collaboration presupposes *goodwill:* a real motivation to make the collaboration function. One Eastern Finnish HR manager summarised this philosophy as follows: 'It can be said that a certain philosophy of goodwill is closely linked to our working culture and [. . .] that we are trying to create the atmosphere of trust and solidarity. Sometimes it works, sometimes not.'

Discussion

On the basis of the study presented it can be said that in the most of the participating Eastern Finnish companies the human resource policy was rather *assimilative* while, in Finland, in the last decade the general tendency has been towards an integrative policy implying *cultural diversity* and *pluralism.* In no participating enterprise has the increase in national and/or cultural diversity led to real institutional changes. In particular, the managers of the small companies estimated that working

in a conventional way is the only real option. Instead, the managerial respondents of the large internationally oriented companies stressed that an ability to recognize and manage a diverse workforce is a precondition for successful multinational operations. In those enterprises, it was estimated that an attainment of intercultural competence is becoming increasingly indispensable.

Changes in the world economy have made business not just more international but also more interdependent. A key issue is how the training and management practices should be reshaped in response to the increasing globalisation pressures. It has become apparent that global companies may play a pioneering role in this process. The research results show that diversity management issues have remained rather alien to the realities of Eastern Finnish working contexts (cf. Trux 2002). In particular, the small and middle size companies are only *awakening* to the fact that they could benefit from the foreign employees' competences on intercultural issues, and that positive diversity management, which enables each employee to give his or her best, is vital for achieving an overall productive and competitive workforce (see Richardson 2005, 63–75). This means that ignoring diversity is no longer an option.

In all working contexts the mainstream people were the norm. It is evident that this kind of human resource strategy fails to provide the representatives of minority cultures with equal opportunity and, thus, to prevent their exclusion. In a culturally diverse environment it is not enough that all people are to be treated the same, rather the achievement of equal opportunities for the representatives of ethnic minorities presupposes *culturally responsive treatment.* Thus, the management of diversity should become an issue of concern. A common belief among the managerial respondents was that equal treatment can overcome the inequalities that exist in the work organisation. This may be true in a culturally homogeneous environment where people share broadly similar norms, motivations, social customs and patterns of behaviour. Equal rights here mean more or less the same rights, and equal treatment involves more or less identical treatment. The principle of equality is therefore relatively easy to define and apply, and discriminatory deviations from it can be identified without much disagreement. This, however, is not the case in a culturally diverse context. Equality consists in equal treatment of those judged to be equal in relevant respects. In a culturally diverse environment, people are likely to disagree on what respects are relevant in a given context, what response is appropriate to them, and

what counts as their equal treatment. Thus, once we take cultural differences into account, equal treatment does not mean identical but differential treatment, raising questions as to how we can ensure that it is really equal across cultures and does not serve as a mask for discrimination or privilege. (Parekh 2000, 242, 261–62; Pitkänen 2003; 2006, 92–115.)

In a culturally diverse work environment, significant culturally based differences may exist, not only in the relationships between managers and employees, but also among majority and minority employees. Therefore, the work communities *as a whole* should be helped to deal with increasing cultural diversity. This perspective defines a work organisation as a set of practices which define individuals as more or less competent community members. In addition to linguistic competences, intercultural competence includes other dimensions, such as cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. Although day-to-day interaction and collaboration at work can provide a good context for learning for becoming interculturally competent, personnel training practices should also be reshaped. In this present study it was common that, although Finnish language proficiency and cultural knowledge were seen as necessary prerequisites, they were not yet seen as sufficient qualifications for work. Training and working experience attained in Finland were desired, whereas qualifications acquired outside Finland were assessed very critically.

Finally, attitudinal changes are needed: instead of ethnocentric short-term policy there is a need for rethinking of the ethical basis of today's world. A change from an ethnocentric worldview to global awareness requires significant attitudinal changes (Hall 1977; Beamer and Varner 2001, 5). In order to avoid ethnocentrism, we should, in one way or another, step outside our own cultural circle to see our systematic blindness. If we succeed in doing this, it may help in relating our thinking to the fact that our way of life does not represent the one and only way of living or world of values and norms, but only one among many. The ultimate aim is to make an emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all human beings and, at the same time, accept and appreciate the differences that exist between people of different cultures. The fact however is that intercultural interaction is not easy; we are all culturally based and culturally biased. Often there is a need for some kind of intercultural transformation. According to Taylor (1994), a person who is successful at working through and learning from daily intercultural interaction experiences has the potential to become interculturally com-

petent (see Mezirow 1991, 167). This may lead to an understanding that, as human beings, we all are both natural and cultural beings, sharing a common human identity, but in a culturally mediated manner. Comparisons between cultures can help one to see different cultural practices as solutions and answers to the same kind of problems in human life. This presupposes multicultural awareness and dialogue with others in order to outline alternative perspectives, and to analyse the interpretation of one's own standing in different perspectives. (Mezirov 1991, 168; 1995, 6; Taylor, 1994.)

Notes

1 A questionnaire was sent to the managers of 717 private enterprises employing a minimum of 10 people.
2 Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, around 25,000 Ingrians have immigrated to Finland. Most of them are descendants of Finnish people who were incorporated into the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War when part of the eastern district of Finland was annexed by the USSR.
3 By 'culture' I refer here to the way of life, including the assumptions and values of which people are not always conscious.
4 This study formed part of a wider research project, Learning Intercultural Competency in the Workplace, which was being carried out in 2003–2006, and was funded by the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Work Environment Fund (see www.uta.fi/learn).
5 Except for one foreign manager, all the managerial respondents were of Finnish origin.
6 In this data collection, I was assisted by Ms Hannele Ojalehto and Ms Sanna-Mari Pöyry. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

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