

Artículo de investigación

## The human factor in intercultural communications: solution methods and technologies

Проблема человеческого фактора в межкультурных коммуникациях: способы и технологии решения

El factor humano en las comunicaciones interculturales: métodos y tecnologías de solución

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### Abstract

Intercultural communication implies mutual understanding of the participants of the communication act, who belong to different national cultures. The purpose of the present article is to determine the problems of the human factor in intercultural communication in a multicultural environment, and methods of solving these problems based on the negotiation of differing points of view and misunderstandings in intercultural communication. The article defines theoretical approaches to the study of the intercultural communication concept and the main research lines in the field of intercultural communication. Based on the analysis of scientific literature and conducted expert survey, the authors analyze the problems arising in intercultural communications and approaches to addressing them. Three main categories of problems related to communication in a multicultural environment are identified, namely: language problems, cultural problems, and problems related to personal perception.

### Аннотация

Межкультурная коммуникация подразумевает взаимопонимание участников коммуникативного акта, которые принадлежат к разным национальным культурам. Целью статьи является определение проблем человеческого фактора в межкультурных коммуникациях в многокультурном окружении и методы решения данных проблем на основе балансировки разногласий и недоразумений в межкультурных коммуникациях. В статье определены теоретические подходы к изучению категории «межкультурная коммуникация», определены основные направления исследований в сфере межкультурной коммуникации. На основании анализа научной литературы и экспертного опроса проанализированы проблемы, возникающие в межкультурных коммуникациях и подходы к их решению. Определены три основные категории проблем, имеющие отношение к коммуникациям в многокультурном окружении, а именно: языковые проблемы,

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**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, human factor, multicultural environment, benefit.

проблемы культурного характера, проблемы, связанные с личным восприятием.

**Ключевые слова:** межкультурная коммуникация, человеческий фактор, многокультурное окружение, ставка налога, льгота.

## Resumen

La comunicación intercultural implica la comprensión mutua de los participantes en un acto comunicativo que pertenecen a diferentes culturas nacionales. El objetivo del artículo es identificar los problemas del factor humano en las comunicaciones interculturales en un entorno multicultural y los métodos para resolver los datos se basan en equilibrar desacuerdos y malentendidos en las comunicaciones interculturales. El artículo define enfoques teóricos para el estudio de la categoría de "comunicación intercultural", define las principales direcciones de investigación en el campo de la comunicación intercultural. Basado en el análisis de la literatura científica y la encuesta de expertos, se analizan los problemas que surgen en las comunicaciones interculturales y los enfoques para su solución. Se identifican tres categorías principales de problemas relacionados con la comunicación en un entorno multicultural, a saber: problemas de lenguaje, problemas de naturaleza cultural, problemas asociados con la percepción personal.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación intercultural, factor humano, ambiente multicultural, tasa impositiva, beneficio.

## Introduction

Contemporary economic and political circumstances both in Russia and around the world are distinguished by an extremely high level of dependence on intercultural relations and intercultural contacts. On the one hand, in highly developed countries, globalization is an integral phenomenon that entails a high level of cultural interpenetration. On the other hand, the unstable situation and sometimes even military actions in developing countries lead to long-term migration of the population and, as a consequence, also become an important factor of intercultural change. Thus, changes in the global business environment are becoming characteristic throughout the world, and are directly related to changes in the human factor, which is a key component in the field of intercultural communications.

Full-fledged administrative relations between representatives of different peoples are impossible without knowledge of the language and respect for the culture of each person, without effective intercultural communication as communication between representatives of different cultures. It should be noted that the mixing of peoples, the interaction of languages and cultures, as well as migration of the population, led to a general increase in

consideration of multicultural communication in management, and the subsequent study of its linguistic, sociological, psycholinguistic, and other aspects.

The main purpose of communication in a multicultural environment is finding a common denominator to exchange ideas and information, attract customers, as well as conclude partnerships among several parties. Intercultural communications are defined as the interaction between people originating from different cultural environments, which, in turn, are characterized by different communication models and styles (Sidorov, 2019; Dudin et al., 2019; Suvorova et al., 2019).

## Literature review

The term of intercultural communication was first coined in 1954 by school of American cultural anthropologists, whose representatives E.T. Hall and G.L. Trager in their work "Culture as Communication" proposed the term of intercultural communication for wide use, justifying the direct link between culture and communication, and the ability to compare the cultures of different peoples of the world (Trager & Hall, 1954).

Taylor O. notes that communication is a product of culture; a way in which people can communicate, and which is conditioned by their culture. The researcher argues that a person can know more than one culture, be an expert in several cultures, but one thing is indisputable: communication is a product and creation of culture (Taylor, 1990).

In the 1970s of the last century, the term of intercultural communication was considered in detail in a narrow sense in the works of L. Samovar and R. Porter "Communication between cultures" (Samovar & Porter, 2012), as well as by J. Condon and Y. Fathi in "Introduction to intercultural communication" (Condon & Fathi, 1975). According to M.B. Bergelson, the concept of intercultural communication in these works was purely practical in nature, had to solve the major problems of the postwar world, which were formed in the intellectual space and public opinion in general concerning the existence of so-called exotic cultures and languages (Bergelson, 2002, p. 22).

Over time, new realities of life began to put forward new more practical problems that required immediate solutions. First of all, this is the process of economic globalization, which combines cultural, scientific, educational, professional, and tourist globalization. As known, in addition to positive changes, globalization also has certain adverse aspects, namely, the fact that it leads to the assimilation of cultures, weakening of national identity, a so-called Americanization of society, and the involvement of numerous borrowings in the language (Catana, 2014).

Today, the term of intercultural communication is based on the classical positivist methodology, systemic and dialectical-synergetic methods, and approaches.

A large number of researchers consider and classify the problems in intercultural communication in terms of modes of communication, namely, verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal patterns (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017; Fellows & Liu, 2016).

According to the study of J. Mackiewicz, and P.J. Winston (Mackiewicz, & Winston, 2005) regarding intercultural communication, the following definitions of these three types of communication are applied. Verbal communication refers to a mode of information transmission containing a verbal mode of messaging using language in both verbal and

written form. Nonverbal communication involves a way of communicating information using nonverbal, wordless behavior. For example, gestures, looks, facial expressions, poses, etc. Paraverbal communication is a way of transmitting information, which is characterized by communication that occurs through touch, eye contact, the force of handshakes, and the like. The above types of communication require special attention when communicating in a multicultural environment.

Gropas R. notes that due to mobility and immigration there are people, who are accustomed to more than one language and cultural system. Such people have the opportunity to adapt freely to one or more cultural environments (Gropas, 2008).

Well-known Russian researcher M. Bergelson identified the main research avenues in the field of intercultural communication, namely: 1. Sociological; 2. Psychological; 3. Linguistic; and 4. Application-oriented (Samovar & Porter, 2012, p. 87).

Sociologists study intercultural communication in two aspects: general and narrow. The problems of intercultural communication are related in general to the social adaptation of migrants and the preservation of the traditions of national minorities, as well as socialization, i.e. adoption of another culture in their own. This aspect is widely studied in recent years due to the unstable political and economic situation in the world.

The study of intercultural communication by psychologists is focused on the influence of cultural differences on the interpretation and categorization processes. Psychological methods of studying intercultural communication include experimental methods, which allow identifying how intergroup communication affects memory, attention, memorization of information, its understanding, as well as the emotions which the speaker experiences in intercultural communication.

The linguistic approach to the study of intercultural communication emphasizes the paramount importance of language in this process. Thus, V.G. Kostomarov and E.M. Vereshchagina, who developed a linguistic theory of speech in the 80s, define intercultural communication as "an adequate understanding of two participants of a communicative act belonging to different national cultures" (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 2005, p. 221).

Studying intercultural communication in the linguistic aspect, Russian scientists have identified several development areas, such as linguistics, cultural studies, ethnolinguistics, etc. Each of these directions is based on the interaction of language and culture and hence is of the interest for intercultural communication. For example, linguistics and regional studies are important in the interaction of culture and language. Ethnolinguistics is focused on the study of the interaction of language with various aspects of the life of peoples, as well as the role of language in the culture of the people. Linguoculturology, in turn, explores the rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and stereotypes enshrined in the language, exploring their interaction.

The hypothesis of the present research is formulated as follows: the increase of the intercultural communication effectiveness in a multicultural environment can be achieved through the use of appropriate methods and approaches to solving communication problems of linguistic, cultural, and personal nature.

## Methods

### a. General description

The theoretical study was based on the methods of system analysis, as well as the theories of international management, and intercultural communications.

The authors have carried out a study of the existing literature focused on the problems that arise in international communication in projects and considered approaches to their solution. To analyze the existing problems, the literature was reviewed using keywords such as communication, international, intercultural, intercultural skills, and intercultural competence, because these aspects reflect the human factor in the problems related to communication. The following databases were used: Science Direct,

Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The task of this search was to review and analyze the problems, methods, and approaches to their solution used to manage international and intercultural communications.

The literature review allowed developing an approach to classifying the problems inherent in international communications in a multicultural environment. In turn, the developed classification of problems allowed ordering the approaches and methods defined in the literature and research to solve problems in intercultural communications. The problems, corresponding methods, and approaches to their solution developed by the authors include also generally accepted types of communications.

Besides, the expert survey was also used to determine the methods and approaches to solving the problems of intercultural communication. The online survey involved 29 experts, including managers of international projects (17 persons), as well as university staff, namely, teachers of the Department of Management (12 persons).

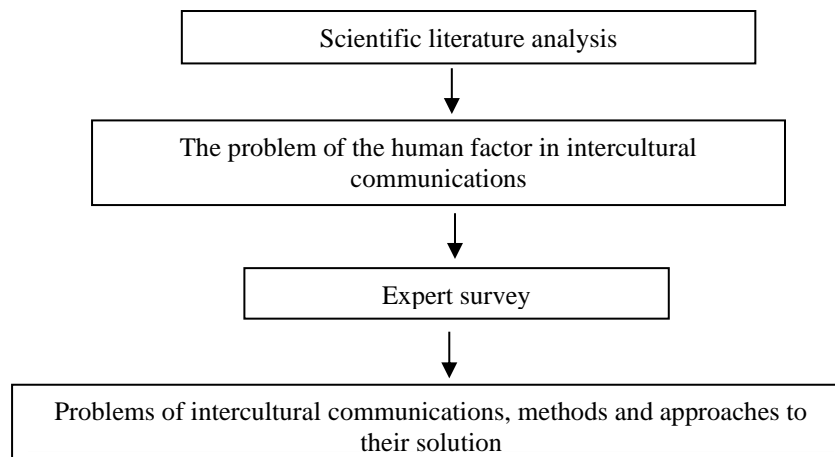
The experts were asked a number of questions concerning the intercultural communication problems, as well as methods and approaches to their solution.

### b. Algorithm

At the first stage of the research, the analysis of scientific literature on the problem of the human factor in intercultural communications was carried out.

At the second stage of the study, an expert survey was conducted on the problems directly related to international communication in a multicultural environment, as well as methods and approaches to their solution.

### c. Flow chart.



**Figure 1.** Stages of the analysis of the problem of the human factor in intercultural communications  
Source: compiled by the authors.

## Results and discussion

### Research results

Let us consider successively the problem categories that are directly related to international communication in a multicultural environment.

#### 1. Language problems in intercultural communication

Language problems are recognized by the experts participating in the survey as the most common type of problems occurring in international communication and multicultural environment. Problems arising from the use of a nonnative language as a common means of communication are usually divided by the type of communication: verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal.

According to experts, conversational verbal problems include most commonly unusual or specific accent of the language, heavy speech, insufficient language skills, and poor vocabulary. Problems in written verbal communication, according to the experts, are associated with misunderstandings and inconsistencies in the translation, insufficient speech skills associated with poor vocabulary, grammatical errors, typos, as well as abbreviations, and the use of professional or everyday slang.

A special subtype of verbal problems is related to interpretation and translation, which, according to one of the experts (Alexander K.), arise "due to the unfamiliar terminology, use of metaphors, unusual or heavy accent, and fuzzy speech." Experts clarify that the interpretation and translation cause particular problems in international communication because it is impossible to estimate the effort and amount of work that needs to be allotted to the translation; it is often difficult to find a translator with enough experience in specific areas, etc.

Language problems of the above types have been studied in terms of methods and approaches which are used to solve them. In general, these methods and approaches are simple solutions, but unfortunately, research and practice indicate that even these simple measures are not widely used. So, some experts recommend using simple words, expressing important points in several ways, and using visual means. One of the experts (Mikhail T., linguist) notes that listening skills are the most important aspect of successful verbal communication.

The above problems of linguistic nature, as well as the corresponding methods and approaches to their solution, are given in Table 1 by type of communication.

**Table 1.** Language problems in intercultural communications and appropriate methods and approaches to their solution

Problems	Methods and approaches
Oral verbal communication: Difficult accent; Difficult pronunciation; Insufficient language knowledge; Poor vocabulary	Explain things in simple words; Use an interpreter, who has the expertise in the relevant field; Use duplication (express things in two ways) when possible; Use visual aids when possible, as well as practice presentations.  Listening skills: Be focused on the main idea of the interlocutor; Eliminate potential sources that distract attention; Express actively full interest and attention; Give signs that mean you are listening objectively and intently; Be flexible and open when new ideas or topics are expressed; Ask for clarification if something is unclear; Check whether you have understood correctly the main points expressed by the interlocutor.
Written verbal communication: Misunderstandings and errors in the translation of the message; Insufficient language skills; Obscure abbreviations and slang usage	Avoid inaccuracies; Carry out spell check; The message should be as short as possible, then it will be read faster and easier to understand; Pay special attention to the topic and the first sentence in the message; Try to attract the attention of the recipient; The basic intention should be simple and easy to understand; Avoid negative wording where possible; Always double-check a message before sending it.
Interpretation and translation: Terminology; Metaphors; Accent; Fuzzy pronunciation	Become familiar with common metaphors and other indirect meanings to avoid confusion and excitement; Invite an interpreter having the knowledge and the relevant expertise; Check whether the interpreter is familiar with the accent or pronunciation of the interlocutors when it is known in advance that they have a specific accent or unclear pronunciation.

Compiled based on the results of an expert survey

## 2. Cultural and personal problems in intercultural communications

Cultural differences often become factors of misunderstanding and inaccuracies in intercultural communications. According to the experts, the main problem is the communication transmission process, where, initially, the notification is compiled and "encoded" in one cultural context, while after transmission, upon receipt, it is "decoded" in another cultural context.

Studies in this regard note that cultural influence on the individual is a significant factor influencing beliefs and behavior models, namely,

trust and fear, lack of participation, and willingness to fulfill obligations, lack of openness, and dissemination of information (Luckmann & Farber, 2016).

According to experts, understanding and using cultural differences gives communicants the opportunity to create an environment of mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation. Thus,

intercultural and personal aspects of communication are interrelated. Let analyze the problems and challenges related to the personal perception of the individual.

The problems of cultural and personal issues and the corresponding methods and approaches to their solution are given in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Cultural and personal issues in intercultural communications and appropriate methods and approaches to their solution

Problems	Methods and approaches
<p>Paraverbal communication inappropriate to a particular situation:            voice;            voice melody;            the pace of the conversation;            voice tone;            emphasizing different words in a sentence</p> <p>Written verbal communication:            lack of emotion can make the perception of letters or written messages in chat rooms and other media too meager, inhuman, or demanding</p> <p>Usually, distrust is caused by the following:            lack of competence, i.e. different qualifications of employees from different countries or companies;            different salaries or work contracts;            the hidden expectations of the stakeholders;            racism and prejudice;            adverse previous experience with colleagues or other people of a given culture;            lack of personal communication;            lack of informal communication</p> <p>Avoiding a certain type of communication, based on personal preferences</p>	<p>Try to get feedback;            Use anonymous questionnaires to identify these issues;            Make sure that the recipient's response to messages meets the sender's purpose</p> <p>Use more polite expressions and phrases;            Communicate important messages via Skype or any other means of virtual communication</p> <p>Apply soft skills;            Implement anonymous questionnaires to identify these issues;            Hold informal social events</p> <p>Maintain and update the communication plan;            Identify these issues;            Use motivational methods;            Use a personal approach</p>

Compiled based on the results of an expert survey

## Discussion

While discussing the language-related problems in intercultural communications, experts note that when working in intercultural projects, it is very important to keep in mind that in the case of team members, who are not native speakers, generally accepted levels of language certification may vary, and do not always provide the required level of proficiency. In addition, because of uncertain language skills or personal inclinations, team members may avoid a certain type of communication (for example, conversational verbal communication), and

prefer another type of communication, which seems easier to them. It is believed that verbal

communication provides greater level of understanding, and therefore, personal, or face-to-face communication is perceived as the best way of communication (Javidan & House, 2001). The experts underline that despite this fact, verbal communication should be supported by written communication where possible, especially in the case of the transmission of important information.

Another fact, which according to experts, should be kept in mind to minimize language

misunderstandings and inaccuracies in intercultural communication is the inability to guarantee one hundred percent appropriate level of language proficiency. At the beginning of the business intercultural communication process, the language skills of communicants may not be identified accurately. Since language and culture are interrelated, the mental aptitudes of some nationalities, especially in the case of proficiency in English as the international business language, allow communicators to use trial and error as the best way to master a foreign language. In other words, people hide the lack of language skills and allow themselves to learn from their mistakes in the course of communication. To address this discrepancy, experts recommend trusting common forms of language certification and at the same time monitor their actual effect depending on the country of issue.

Thus, planning the level of language skills required for successful intercultural communication is a necessary step in preparing for international business communication.

At the same time, according to experts, it is necessary to distinguish between spoken and professional language styles. If a spoken foreign language is mandatory to perform any joint activity, while the permanent availability of a skilled interpreter is not possible, the appropriate level of knowledge of the spoken language should be checked in advance.

Speaking about the problems of cultural nature, the experts note that there are two important aspects necessary for improvement and successful work in a multicultural environment, namely, intercultural consciousness and intercultural resistibility.

As noted in the scientific research, intercultural consciousness is the ability to respect others and be able to temporarily change one's own views in order to build long-term intercultural ties; while intercultural resistibility is the ability to face and adjust or adapt to new situations in a culture that is different from the individual's own culture (Rathje, 2007).

Speaking about personal problems, it should be noted that noise in communication is a consequence of own perception barriers which dictate how we present or perceive messages, as well as personal interpretations, attitudes, biases, and prejudices which lead to ineffective communication (Zubkova, 2011).

Personal perception is a category which includes questions related to people's perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and psychology. So, as experts clarify, people focused on personal relationships, are less comfortable to discuss important issues in writing or on the phone. This is called avoiding a certain type of communication owing to personal preferences.

Human behavioral competencies, or so-called soft skills, enable innovative responses to circumstances, where people already have solutions to their problems. According to experts, soft skills are essential for intercultural communication. According to research (De Leon, 2014; López-Rocha, 2016), soft skills are most important for managing people in intercultural environment.

Knowledge of the value orientations of the partner in international communication, according to experts, also helps to avoid misunderstanding, anticipate partner's behavior, goals, desires, and thus ensures success in communicating with unfamiliar people.

To overcome communication barriers at the professional level in the course of intercultural communication, a huge array of educational literature, intercultural training, and training on the organization of intercultural cooperation has been created abroad. In the USA, there is a professional association called the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) which is functioning since the 60s of the last century. In addition, in the same years, American experts have developed the first cultural assimilator. Since 1977, the Journal of Intercultural Communication has been published on the initiative of UNESCO, and subsequently the Nordic Network for Intercultural Communication, and the Organization of Intercultural and Transcultural Relations were established.

The authors believe that Russia should widely implement this positive international experience, developing its own working arrangements to improve the effectiveness of intercultural cooperation and communications.

## Conclusion

The article analyzes the problems arising in intercultural communications, as well as offers approaches to their solution. Taking into account the analysis of the literature, three main categories related to communication in a multicultural environment are identified, namely,



language problems, problems of a cultural nature, and problems related to personal perception.

Participants in intercultural communication in a multicultural environment should have a set of core competencies. Analysis of scientific research and expert opinion indicates that the application of soft skills is the main tool that is used to solve problems and challenges associated with the human factor in intercultural communication in a multicultural environment. Therefore, when communication is carried out in a multicultural environment, it is necessary to formalize special requirements to intercultural competences of communicators.

The results of the study have confirmed the hypothesis that improving the effectiveness of intercultural communication in a multicultural environment can be achieved through the use of appropriate methods and approaches to solving communication problems of linguistic, cultural, and personal nature.

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