

ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF FRONT OFFICE EMPLOYEES: THE CASE OF HOTELS IN SLOVENIA

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Abstract

The growth of companies in the tourism and hospitality industry is becoming dependent on the successfulness of intercultural interactions between their employees and culturally diverse visitors. Since the front office employees in hotels are the first and sometimes the only representatives of the company with whom guests interact, it is particularly important that they develop intercultural competence.

Purpose – The purpose of our research is to find out the level of intercultural competence and relationships between specific dimensions of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia.

Methodology – Our empirical research is based on Reisinger's conceptual model of intercultural competence. We explored the levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence, and the relationships between these dimensions.

Findings – The results of our study indicate that the levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimension of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia are high and that both, the cognitive and the emotional dimension, are positively related to the behavioural dimension.

Contribution – Our study contributes to the empirical validation of the particular conceptual model of intercultural competence and to the empirical research on the relationships between certain dimensions of intercultural competence. As regards practical and social contributions, the study raises awareness of the importance of being interculturally competent in the period of intense international social and business interactions and indicates the requisite skills and capabilities to increase the level of intercultural competence.

Keywords: tourism, intercultural competence, front office employees, hotels, Slovenia.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become international phenomena with global consequences. It has grown at a faster rate than both the wider economy and other significant sectors in recent years (WTTC, 2015, 3). This has increased the likelihood that employees in the tourism and hospitality industry will come more often into contacts with visitors from many different cultures. Culturally distinct groups of visitors develop different perceptions of travel products and assign different degrees of importance to product attributes (Reisinger, 2011, 343). They also have different expectations, seek different benefits and use different choice criteria. They differ in preferences for accommodation, food and the other services, as well as in the ways of communication. As the number of interactions between the individuals from diverse cultures is increasing, the question of

employees' understanding and responding to cultural differences and similarities in thinking, perceiving and behaving of visitors, is becoming increasingly important.

One of the key organisational units of companies in this industry, where it comes to the intense contacts between employees and tourists, are receptions and front offices, respectively. The whole process of guest accommodation cycle usually takes place in front offices (see Lebe, 2012, 591; Sudhir, 2013, xxiii). As they encounter increasingly culturally diverse tourists, they have to be able to manage these differences. They have to understand the concept of culture and its influences on tourists' perceptions and behaviour, as well as to be familiar with the requisite responses to these influences. Training of employees in the tourism and hospitality industry for recognition and mastering of cultural differences is becoming an important factor of competitive advantages of tourist companies. Thus, intercultural competence, which is classified among the key competences of life-long learning (European Communities, 2007) and is regarded as one of the key competences for a well-functioning society (see OECD, 2001; Rychen and Salganik, 2006), is becoming also the key competence of certain employees in the tourist companies.

The purpose of our research is to find out the level of intercultural competence and relationships between specific dimensions of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia, who are usually the only representatives of the hotel with whom guests interact. Our empirical research is based on Reisinger's (2011) conceptual model of dimensions and stages of intercultural competence. According to this model interculturally competent persons have the knowledge on foreign cultures, they are aware of the importance of understanding the co-speaker's culture and are ready to gain new knowledge to better interact with persons from foreign cultures (cognitive dimension), they have positive attitude and try to understand and accept different cultures (emotional (affective) dimension) and they possess requisite skills and capabilities to effectively interact with persons from foreign cultures (behavioural dimension). Since our empirical analysis was directed into assessment of intercultural competence of employees while interacting with individuals from foreign culture in Slovenia, we left out the individual's competence to integrate into foreign culture (environmental dimension), which is, according to this model, conceptualized as the fourth dimension of intercultural competence.

The paper is organized as follows: In the first section the concepts of culture and interculturality, the concepts of competence and intercultural competence and the tasks and requisite competences of hotels' front office employees as the key theoretical backgrounds are examined. In the second section the hypotheses are developed, in the third section, however, empirical analysis is elaborated and the results are presented. The fourth section is conclusion.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

1.1. Culture and Interculturality

The tourism and hospitality services are arranged among *personal-interactive services*, as they require the most intense interaction between the provider and customer, a high degree of customization, information exchange, and trust (Mills, 1986). Thus, the tourism and hospitality industry relies heavily on the positive perceptions of people providing services to tourists. However, perceptions of services are very subjective and depend upon the individual cultural profile and cultural standards that define high quality services (Reisinger, 2011, 343).

Culture is commonly defined as the system of shared values, attitudes, communication patterns, beliefs, behaviours, norms, material objects, and symbolic resources that distinguishes the members of one group of people from others (Kluckhohn 1951; Hofstede, 1983; Hall, 1989; Inglehart, 1997; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; Lewis, 1999; House et al., 2004). Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2012, 11) define culture as the rules for living and functioning in society. Because the rules differ from culture to culture¹, in order to function and be effective in a particular culture, you need to know how to »play by the rules«. The rules enable us to make sense of our surroundings and reduce uncertainty about the social environment.

Increasing cultural complexity of contemporary social and business environments require an understanding of the importance of managing cultural differences in a way that they become an opportunity (Korez-Vide, 2014, 1). A culturally diverse society has to realise that *interculturality* is a key prerequisite for effective communication to take place. 'Interculturality involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures, and using this awareness of otherness to evaluate one's own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding' (Council of Europe, 2009, 10). It enables people to function effectively and achieve interactional and transactional goals in situations where cultural otherness and difference are involved. Interculturality is based on a number of underlying cognitive, affective and behavioural competences, combined and known under the term *intercultural competence*.

1.2. Individual's Competences

Early explanations of individual's competences (e.g. White, 1959; Argyle, 1967; Boyatzis, 1982), as well as more contemporary ones (e.g. Civelli, 1997; Rychen and Salganik, 2003; Bratton and Gold, 2003) explain individual's competences as a combination of personal characteristics, knowledge, skills, capabilities and motivation, used by an individual at the workplace. Authors discuss also several sub-components of individual's competences and attribute to them varying importance. For example Bratton and Gold (2003, 228) expose self-control, self-development, positive attitude

¹ Besides national culture, culture can be differentiated against various other levels; employees for example are socialized into three levels of cultures: national culture, professional culture, and corporate culture. The influence of professional and corporate culture tends to grow nowadays.

towards work, cooperation readiness and creativity. The combination of various components and sub-components impact individual's successfulness at the workplace. Perrenould (1997) understands individual's competences as activation, usage and intertwining of the entirety of knowledge, capabilities, motivation, self-image and values that enable the individual to be successful in complex, diverse and unpredictable situations. Thus, the individual's competences could be described as a complex mixture of personal characteristics, including values, gained in the childhood, knowledge, gained by education and training, and experiences, gained by employment². According to Rychen and Salganik (2003, 46 - 47) the individual's competences should be viewed in the context, since the competences are the result of individual's characteristics and the context of the workplace.

Individual's competences are divided according to various levels into core, role specific and organisation specific and according to various dimensions into expected, actual, distinctive and descriptive competences (Kohont, 2005, 36). Gruban (2007) distinguishes among visible or noticeable and invisible or unnoticeable individual's competences. Individual's competences constantly change and adapt to new situations (Perrenould, 1997, 23). Their upgrading signifies the individual's personal development.

1.3. Intercultural Competence

Being interculturally competent means that a person from one culture is able to interact effectively with people from different cultures (Guilherme, 2012). There exist a multitude of different models to conceptualise elements and stages of *intercultural competence*. The most renowned are those of Bennet (1993), Byram (1997), Deardorff (2009) and Reisinger (2011).

For Bennet (1993) three conditions are necessary for intercultural contact to be constructive: 1) intercultural mindset (cognitive characteristics) – the recognition of cultural differences and the maintenance of a positive attitude toward them (e.g. cultural self-awareness, culture-general and culture-specific knowledge, interaction analysis), 2) intercultural skillset (behavioural characteristics) – the ability to use learning-to-learn frameworks to identify potential areas of misunderstandings and to choose behaviour appropriately (e.g. empathy, information gathering skills, relationship building skills, listening and problem solving skills) and 3) intercultural sensitivity (affective characteristics) – the ability to experience cultural difference in sophisticated ways (e.g. curiosity, cognitive flexibility, open-mindedness, a non-judgmental posture, tolerance of ambiguity). According to Bennet's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) the intercultural competence is a set of stages along a continuum – from “denial” of the existence of cultural similarities and differences, through “adaptation”, which is defined as cognitive frame shifting, cultural empathy, or behavioural code-shifting, to “integration”, where more than one cultural perspective, mindset and behaviour have been integrated. Each of the six stages is characterized by increasing sensitivity to cultural difference. The first three DMIS stages are ethnocentric (i.e., one's own culture is experienced as central to the

² For a broader definition of the term 'competence' see Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009.

understanding of others). The second three stages are ethnorelative (i.e., one's own culture is experienced within the context of other cultures).

Byram (1997) defines the core dimensions of intercultural competence as attitudes, knowledge and skills, which he breaks down into five "savoirs". The "savoirs" define "having the know-how" to relativize the self and value the other; to know the self and the other; to interpret and understand; to act with critical cultural awareness and to discover and interact (1997, 88-89). He views intercultural competence as mediated by the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence through which meanings and behaviours are negotiated.

Deardorff's (2009) Process Model of Intercultural Competence describes intercultural competence as a composition of attitudes, knowledge and skills that are conducive to the development of intercultural competence. According to Deardorff (2009) key components of intercultural competence are respect for otherness, tolerance for ambiguity, empathetic attitude, communicative awareness, knowledge of how other cultural groups function, skills of comparison, interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness.

According to Reisinger's (2011, 378 - 383) model the interculturally competent persons are able to function (cognitive dimension), to adapt (emotional (affective) dimension), to cooperate (behavioural dimension) and to integrate (environmental dimension) into a new culture. The *cognitive domain* refers to the acquisition of cultural knowledge and consists of (1) knowledge, (2) awareness, (3) language, and (4) learning. Individuals with cultural knowledge (general and specific) can function in a specific culture, since they have the enhanced ability to minimize misunderstandings with persons from this culture. Awareness (of self and others) is the key factor on which effective and appropriate multicultural interactions depend. Those who are aware of their own culture and its values, traditions, and norms can become aware of and understand the culture and values of others. Awareness leads to deeper knowledge, skills, attitudes, and emotions. Besides mastering of language(s), the cognitive domain also includes learning. Learning refers to the process of acquisition of knowledge, or meta-cognitive knowledge. It involves obtaining knowledge about (1) person aspects, (2) task variables, and (3) strategy. The *emotional (affective) domain* refers to the motivations to use the acquired cultural knowledge and to emotions, feelings, and attitudes attained through knowledge. The individual who develops positive feelings and attitudes towards a new culture is able to adapt to a new culture. The affective domain consists of (1) motivations to use the acquired knowledge, (2) sensitivity to cultural differences, (3) attitudes toward a new culture and those from different cultural backgrounds, and (4) personal characteristics that help a person to use the acquired cultural knowledge. Having positive attitudes toward those who are culturally different, and showing interest in and respect for their traditions, history and ways of doing things, are part of the affective domain. There are also personality traits or attributes, in addition to internal values, norms, and beliefs of one's home culture, that are needed for effective intercultural competence. The examples of these personality traits are having respect of others; being tolerant of cultural differences; having courage to interact with others; being able to manage conflict, handle emotions (emotional intelligence), and adapt to and accept others (cultural intelligence); being empathetic, flexible, understanding,

curious, ambitious, patient, persistent, passionate about other cultures, willing to suspend judgements, able to self-disclose and open to others and establish interpersonal relationships (social intelligence). The *behavioural domain* refers to skills and abilities needed in order to use cultural knowledge. The individual who has specific abilities and skills is able to effectively engage in a new culture. Skills include communication skills (language and non-verbal), social skills (relationship, interpersonal), comparative skills (being able to compare values of different cultures), task-completion skills, or affective skills (human warmth skills). Abilities include the ability to adjust to a new cultural, social or political environment, understand others, establish relationships, see and understand the world from others' perspectives, deal with stress, manage anxiety, reduce risk, display patience, deal with misunderstanding, solve problems, avoid problems, resolve conflicts, work cooperatively with others, and accept different ways of doing things. The *environmental domain* refers to relationships between individuals and the environment. The individual who knows the cultural orientation of a new environment is able to fully integrate into this environment. It consists of (1) social interactions, (2) relationships with nature, and (3) orientation toward time.

On the basis of conceptual models of intercultural competence, several quantitative and qualitative intercultural competence assessment tools have been developed (e.g. Council of Europe, 2009; Lenz and Berthele, 2010; Reisinger, 2011; European Commission, 2014).

1.4. Tasks and Requisite Competences of Hotels' Front Office Employees

The purchase of services is based on intangible experiences and subsequent perceptions of customers. Customers estimate them according to the behavioural clues of employees in the specific service company. Direct interaction of employees in these companies with customers represents both – employees' service (performance, relationship, behaviour) and the company itself. Therefore, the tourists are estimating services of tourist companies according to the behavioural clues of employees in these companies (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996; Kurtz and Clow, 1998; cited from Kusluvan, 2003, 33).

Due to the globalization demands and expectations of tourists have been changed. These shifts have become challenges for hospitality industry, especially for hotel management. In the present high competitive hotel management the managers have to be aware and attentive of altered needs and demands of their guests (Abdullah et al., 2012, 199).

Front office (reception) represents the central part of each hotel or accommodation facility, seen and experienced by guests. Front office is one of the most important hotel's organisational units, since it enables the first contact of guests with the hotel and shows the hotel's image (Castillo et al., 2014, 286). According to Bardi (2003, 1-2) front office represents the heart of the hotel. The effective communication of the front office personnel represents the image of hotel's hospitality. The process of registration is considered as one of the most important hotel's experiences of a guest. According to Ismail (2002, 134) quite 75 % of the whole guest's contentment is formed at the time of

registration. Additionally, since the hotel's reception operates 24 hours a day, front office represents one of the most vital hotel's departments.

According to Ismail (2002, 98) hotel's front office covers two fields: front desk and uniform services. Front desk represents the first and the last contact point of guests with the hotel. It is also an information point for hotel's guests and hotel's employees. The key staff at this field are front office manager, front desk agents or desk clerks, reservations agents and reservation managers, mail and information clerks, cashiers, night auditors. Uniform services provide various services for hotel's guests. Personnel of uniform services usually encompasses bell staff, telephone operator, valet, concierge, and elevator operator (Ismail, 2002, 98; Bardi, 2003; 50; Kasavana and Brooks, 2005, 65). Regular activities of hotel's reception comprise reservations, registrations, room's allotment, guests' accounts keeping, and timing of services for guests (Kasavana and Brooks, 2005, 64). In smaller hotels individual front office employee carries out more tasks.

The accommodation cycle of hotel's guests consists of four periods: before arrival (reservation), at arrival (registration), at stay (offer of hotel's services) and at departure (checkout and payment settlement) (Sudhir, 2013, xxiii). In each period of accommodation cycle front office personnel is coming into specific interaction with guests. Thus, these employees take care of positive and pleasant experiences of guests during the whole accommodation cycle. While the number and the processes of these periods haven't been changed, due to the information revolution and the consequent development of web tools, the opposite has happened with performance of guest's accommodation. Present tourists make bookings via World Wide Web, at the arrival and during the stay, however, they expect top services, in line with global standards in this field. For this reason it is important that the hotels' employees, who are in direct contact with guests, respond to the guests' expectations which have been created beforehand by the information technology. Additionally, due to increasing cultural diversity of hotel's guests, front office personnel has to be aware of and sensitive to the changes in guests' profiles and behaviour.

Globalization's influences on guests' behaviour, demand specific characteristics of these employees: skills of interpersonal relations, multilingualism, the genuine interest for guests' needs and enjoyment in their fulfilment, skills of creative problem-solving, action-orientation capability, techno-savvy skills, as well as orientation and motivation for acquiring new guests and retaining the regular ones (Sudhir, 2013, xxi-xxii). The most important tools of front office personnel's verbal communication are the usage of appropriate salutation, adaptability of conversation, thanks expression, listening and jargon avoidance (Ismail, 2002, 320). The effective non-verbal communication of these employees mainly comprises, however, communication with a smile, awareness of and responsiveness to the guest's body language, as well as adherence to the dress code.

Thus, front office personnel has to possess various knowledge and skills and to be able to meet the needs of contemporary, global-conscious guests, whereby the knowledge and understanding of guests' culture are of key importance to satisfy their needs (Ismail, 2002, str. 325). For these employees it is particularly important to understand, respect and respond to the cultural diversity of guests.

2. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

According to the cognitive dimension the interculturally competent individuals possess general knowledge on cultures, they are ready to acquire specific knowledge on cultures, they are aware of the importance of understanding the culture of guests and they are ready to learn new language in order to better interact with guests from foreign cultures. In reference to the content of this dimension we tested the hypothesis 1:

H1: The level of cognitive dimension of intercultural competence of front office personnel in hotels in Slovenia is high.

According to the emotional (affective) dimension the interculturally competent individuals are motivated to use the acquired cultural knowledge, have the positive attitude towards the other cultures, try to understand and accept them, and herewith, they are able to adapt to a new culture. In reference to the content of this dimension we tested the hypothesis 2:

H2: The level of emotional (affective) dimension of intercultural competence of front office personnel in hotels in Slovenia is high.

According to the behavioural dimension the interculturally competent individuals have the requisite skills and abilities for using the cultural knowledge in the interaction with guests from these cultures, and thus, they are able to effectively engage in a new culture. In reference to the content of this dimension we tested the hypothesis 3:

H3: The level of behavioural dimension of intercultural competence of front office personnel in hotels in Slovenia is high.

In line with the cognitive and the behavioural dimension we assume that interculturally competent employees are motivated to acquire new cultural knowledge and in this way adapt their capabilities and skills to the new culture. We tested the hypothesis 4:

H4: The cognitive dimension of intercultural competence of the front office personnel in hotels in Slovenia is positively related to the behavioural dimension of intercultural competence.

In line with the emotional (affective) and the behavioural dimension of intercultural competence we assume that interculturally competent employees are aware of the importance of positive relationship towards the other culture and are motivated to appropriately adapt their capabilities and skills to the new culture. We tested the hypothesis 5:

H5: The emotional (affective) dimension of intercultural competence of front office personnel in hotels in Slovenia is positively related to the behavioural dimension of intercultural competence.

3. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

3.1. Measurement Instrument Development and Research Methods

Measurement instrument for empirical research was based on Reisinger's (2011) conceptual model of dimensions and stages of intercultural competence. According to this model the interculturally competent persons are able to function (cognitive dimension), to adapt (affective (emotional) dimension), to cooperate (behavioural dimension) and to integrate (environmental dimension) into new culture. Since our research was directed into assessment of intercultural competence of employees while interacting with individuals from foreign culture in Slovenia, we left out the individual's competence to integrate into foreign culture (environmental domain). In the research we explored the levels of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia for each of the three dimensions of this competence – cognitive, affective and behavioural. Additionally, we explored the relationships between single dimensions of intercultural competence.

Dimensionality, construct validity, and reliability of the measurement instrument was assessed with the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), using the principal component analysis. The hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 were tested with descriptive statistics (calculation of average values and the t test for independent sample), and the hypotheses H4 and H5 with Pearson's correlation coefficient. The reliability of single scales was assessed with Cronbach alpha coefficient.

Primary data were collected with structured questionnaire by electronic and telephone survey. For the measurement of the proposed constructs, closed structured survey questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements for measuring the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence, 8 statements for emotional dimension and 14 questions for behavioural dimension. The respondents assessed their levels of intercultural competence on the 5-stage Likert-scale (for cognitive and emotional dimension) and 5 point categorical scale for behavioural dimension. Measurement scales can be observed from Table 1.

3.2. Sample Selection and Characteristics

The sample for the empirical research consisted of 245 hotels in Slovenia. All the hotels from public register of categorized hotels, provided by SPIRIT agency of Slovenia were included in the sample. The main respondents were individuals employed in hotel reception desks or reservation services. 120 wholly fulfilled questionnaires were received with 48.98 % respondents' responsiveness.

Concerning the employment status of respondents, 10.00 % of respondents were employed in the reservation services, 38.33 % in reservation services and 51.67 % were employed in the hotels that combine both functions. 44.17 % of respondents came from hotels with less than 50 accommodation facilities, 18.33 % from between 51 and 100, 10.83 % from hotels between 101 and 150, and 26.67 % from hotels with more than 150 accommodation facilities. According to hotels categorization 2.52 % of

respondents were employed in 5* hotels, 53.78 % in 4* hotels, 41.15 % in 3* hotels and 2.52 % of respondents were employed in hotels categorized as 2* hotels.

The final sample consisted of 72.27 % of female respondents and 27.73 % of male respondents. Concerning the respondents age, 42.86 % were aged between 21 and 30 years, 44.45 % between 31 and 40 years, and 12.61 % between 41 and 50 years. 26.67 % of respondents has acquired secondary education, 54.00 % acquired undergraduate degree, and 5.83 % postgraduate degree.

3.3. Dimensionality, Construct Validity, and Reliability

Dimensionality, construct validity, and reliability of the measurement instrument were assessed with the exploratory factor analyses (EFA), using the principal component analysis. Altogether four factor analyses were performed, namely for cognitive, emotional and two behavioural components consisting of skills and abilities. In the process of EFA three of the items were eliminated for the behavioural component (showing patience, working in cooperation with others, working on different ways), due to low communalities or cross loadings.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy for all final solutions was adequate, also Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at $p < 0.01$ (see Table 1).

Table 1: **Rotated components matrix with the items, their means, standard deviations, loadings and construct reliabilities**

	Means	Stan. dev.	Factor loadings	Reliabilities
Cognitive component – knowledge				
3. Due to the knowledge I have, I am capable to avoid possible misunderstandings in interactions with other cultures	4.15	.589	0.813	0.817
1. I have the knowledge about other cultures	4.08	.591	0.786	
6. I attempt to understand the value system of certain cultural group	4.15	.657	0.674	
2. I am aware of the importance of knowledge about other cultures	4.45	.634	0.632	
5. If I do not have enough knowledge about certain culture, I am willing to acquire it	4.17	.748	0.595	
4. Most of the knowledge about other cultures I have acquired experientially	4.18	.774	0.554	
Cognitive component – awareness				
10. For a better work performance I am willing to learn new foreign languages	4.42	.681	0.811	0.768
9. Insufficient knowledge on foreign languages poses a barrier in interactions with members of other cultures	4.31	.786	0.738	
8. I am aware that the culture of tourist is so much important for him/her as my culture is important for me	4.43	.605	0.684	
7. I adjust communication with respect to the cultural group I am in contact with	4.23	.683	0.680	
<i>KMO= 0.853; Bartlett's test ($p < 0.05$); Total variance extracted =57.27%</i>				

	Means	Stan. dev.	Factor loadings	Reliabilities
Emotional (affective) component				
10. I am capable to establish interpersonal relationship in contact with others	4.49	.624	0.855	0.927
3. I am capable to solve the conflicts	4.38	.636	0.847	
6. I am understanding	4.45	.607	0.804	
9. I am persistent	4.40	.726	0.795	
7. I am curious	4.45	.607	0.795	
2. I am tolerant to culturally different	4.50	.649	0.791	
8. I am ambitious	4.34	.764	0.768	
4. I control my emotions	4.24	.663	0.733	
1. I respect others	4.58	.657	0.730	
5. I am ready to adjust to the others	4.16	.661	0.688	
<i>KMO= 0.911; Bartlett's test (p<0.05); Total variance extracted = 61.17 %</i>				
Behavioural component – skills				
2. Social skills (interpersonal relations)	4.29	.679	0.835	0.676
4. Emotional capabilities (human warmth)	4.29	.681	0.737	
1. Communication skills (verbal, non-verbal)	4.65	.545	0.702	
3. Comparative skills (capability to compare different cultures)	3.81	.770	0.590	
<i>KMO= 0.668; Bartlett's test (p<0.05); Total variance extracted = 51.99 %</i>				
Behavioural component (abilities) – problem resolving abilities				
6. Mastery of misunderstandings	4.13	.766	0.895	0.897
8. Solving conflicts	3.97	.965	0.845	
7. Solving problems	4.18	.752	0.807	
3. Overcoming stress	4.27	.796	0.776	
4. Reducing risks	4.02	.722	0.758	
Behavioural component (abilities) – relationship abilities				
2. Relationship building	4.32	.686	0.852	0.657
1. Adjusting to a new culture	3.82	.741	0.817	
<i>KMO= 0.850; Bartlett's test (p<0.05); Total variance extracted = 62.59%</i>				

CC – cognitive component; EC – emotional component; BC – behavioural component
 Source: own.

According to Eigenvalues, two factors were extracted with the Eigenvalues higher than 1 for cognitive component and two for behavioural component measuring abilities. In all cases, the total variance explained was higher than 50%. With the majority of the variance of items explained, we moved forward towards the rotated component matrix explanation for the construct with more than one factor, for which Varimax method was applied. Rotated and unrotated components matrix with single items, their means, standard deviations, and loadings are presented in Table 1. As can be seen from Table 1 the convergent validity can be supported for all measurement constructs since all factor loadings on single factors are higher than 0.6. Cronbach alphas for indicating the reliability of the constructs reached the values of 0.6 or more, meaning that the constructs were internally consistent. First factor for cognitive component was named “knowledge” and the second “communication”. Also abilities, the part of the behavioural component, resolved in two factors. The first was named “problem resolving abilities” and the second “relationship abilities”.

3.4. Results

We tested the hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 with the one-sample t-test. All hypotheses stated that the level of competences for cognitive, emotional and behavioural component would be high. It was expected that the mean value of the single items for all of the three components will be higher than 3. Therefore, the mean numbers for all items presented in Table 1 were tested against that value. All t-tests were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, meaning that we can give support for the first three hypotheses.

In the second phase of the research, the factor scores were calculated for the single factors using the regression method. This was done in order to reduce the numbers of variables that were used for testing of hypotheses. Then Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated between the newly constructed variables. The results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen the majority of coefficients are positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, meaning that there is a positive correlation between the three the components of competences.

Table 2: Correlations between the three components of employee competences

	CC - knowledge	CC - communication	EC	BC - skills	BC - problem resolving abilities	BC - relationship abilities
CC - knowledge	1					
CC - awareness	.000	1				
EC	** .507	** .327	1			
BC - skills	** .450	* .222	** .411	1		
BC - problem resolving abilities	n.s	n.s	** .280*	** .375	1	
BC - relationship abilities	** .385	* .213	** .353	** .414	n.s	1

CC – cognitive component; EC – emotional component; BC – behavioural component

** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

Source: own.

Both cognitive components (knowledge and communication) are positively related to skills and relationship abilities, which constitute the behavioural component. Relationships are significant at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$. There is no relationship between both cognitive components and problem resolving abilities, meaning that we can only partially support H4. Concerning the relationship between emotional and behavioural competences component the results of the empirical study from Table 2 suggest that there is positive relationship between emotional component and skills, problem resolving abilities and relationship abilities. All relationships are positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, therefore we can support H5.

The results of our study indicate that the levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia are high and that both, the cognitive and the emotional dimension, are positively related to the behavioural dimension of intercultural competence.

4. CONCLUSION

Culture defines social rules, establishes conventions in terms what is appropriate and what is not, and affects peoples' perceptions and behaviour. If the globalization trends will continue, cultural diversity of tourists and visitors will represent the future of tourism and hospitality industry. Most of the tourists will be international tourists with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, intercultural competence, as the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural context, will be of key importance for the future success of the tourism industry. Interculturally competent employees in the tourism and hospitality industry not only have the knowledge of their guests' cultures, which means that they understand the major value orientations of their customers, are aware of and sensitive to cultural differences among international tourist markets, but are also motivated and capable to learn, understand, and respect the influence of national culture on tourists' behaviour.

Due to the recent social and economic dimensions of globalization tourism and hospitality companies also increasingly hire culturally diverse workforce. They have to adapt to the multicultural environment of its workforce, otherwise the relationships between customers and employees may be threatened. In these companies managers have to pay more attention to the effective cultural human resource management. Knowledge of the culture of the company's employees and customers is important to an understanding of how the customers and employees will behave with the aim of more effective marketing and human resource management.

Cultural distance between the tourist and host culture importantly influences the individual's intercultural competence. Besides cultural factors, intercultural competence is under the impact of various other factors, as for example age, gender, context or political and economic factors that determine the ability of an individual to effectively deal in a multicultural environment. In addition, the extent to which an individual can be trained to acquire required cultural knowledge and skills is important for achieving intercultural competence. Tourism literature shows that contacts with people from other cultures and speaking other languages, as well as participating in exchange programs or internships, provide first and excellent opportunities for fostering intercultural competence development. The literature also shows that intercultural competence development is an on-going process. New challenges always occur despite the fact that an individual may constantly develop and expand his or her competences.

There exist several conceptual models of intercultural competence. According to one of the recent models – Reisinger's (2011) model –, intercultural competence consists of cognitive, emotional (affective), behavioural and environmental domain and refers to the individual's ability to effectively function, adapt, engage and integrate into another culture. Our research of the level of intercultural competence of front office employees in hotels in Slovenia, which is based on the Reisinger's model, contributes to the empirical validation of this particular conceptual model. Additionally, the findings of our study contribute to the empirical research on the relationships between certain dimensions of intercultural competence. As regards practical and social contributions, the study raises awareness of the importance of being interculturally competent in the

period of intense international social and business interactions and indicates the requisite skills and capabilities to increase the level of intercultural competence. Since the intercultural competence assessment tool depends considerably on the particular conceptual model adopted, our research could be biased as regards the elements assessed and the interpretations made on this basis. We consider this dependence as a limitation that could impact the reliability of results. Future studies should focus on the development of unified, consistent and reliable intercultural competence assessment tool for employees on certain workplaces.

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