

# COMPETENCES CURRENTLY NECESSARY FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS SPECIALISTS WORKING IN LATVIA

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## **Abstract**

*The objective of the research was to find out the most necessary competences of external relations specialists working in Latvia at the present moment, as well as to provide solutions for ensuring the acquisition of the necessary competences. In the research, the working environment of external relations specialists and data obtained in 2011 from surveying the graduates of the study program External Relations of Organizations, implemented at the Latvia University of Agriculture, are analysed. The results reveal that most of the skills needed for external relations specialists are related to cooperation with foreign partners, as well as that external relations specialists in Latvia most of all need to possess and improve cross-cultural communication competence, including awareness of cultural differences, as well as knowledge in specific business etiquettes and ways of communicating and thinking typical of different cultures. The necessary competences of external relations specialists should be improved by means of ensuring more cross-cultural communication opportunities and integrating the acquisition of more culture-specific etiquettes into the curriculum.*

**Key words:** *competences, cross-cultural communication, external relations education.*

## **Introduction**

An external relations specialist is the person that performs duties related to ensuring successful external relations of an organization (Professional Standard of..., 2003). Such kind of a job that involves a lot of responsibility due to the need to ensure a good image of an organization sets high standards for the competences these specialists shall possess.

The specific professional competences considered to be necessary for employees that work as external relations specialists in Latvia include: team leading, ability to develop and organize partnership projects, capability of planning and organizing the process of communication with foreign partners, knowledge in business etiquette in a multicultural environment, legal correspondence in native and foreign languages, ability to analyse and assess information in a foreign language, control translation quality (Professional Standard of..., 2003).

In order to be competent, a specialist needs to possess competency in appropriate areas. D. Dubois defines competency as underlying characteristic an individual possesses and uses which leads to successful performance in a life role (Dubois, 1993). **As regards external relations specialists**, the author defines their competency as the capability to successfully manage local and international partnership by means of applying communication and managerial skills.

In general, each citizen also needs a wide range of key competences to adapt flexibly to the rapidly changing and highly interconnected world (Key Competences..., 2008). According to the above mentioned, the aim to cover all of the currently topical competences in the business world should be kept in mind when implementing study programs that prepare specialists to be employed in companies or institutions that often interact with partners and adapt to the rapidly changing world.

External relations specialists are required to develop their language, communication and cooperation competences to a far more higher level than other specialists, as they are the ones that need to deal with communication tasks and challenges within a society of one culture, as well as in a cross-cultural level in most cases on an everyday basis. They are the ones who have been employed particularly for that reason – to successfully arrange external activities and ensure successful communication and cooperation with local and foreign partners.

Communication competence is the ability to choose a communication behaviour that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation (Spitzberg, Cupach, 1984).

The task of an external relations specialist is to ensure such an appropriate and effective behaviour, and he/she is considered to be competent in this respect (communication) if able to do so, but due to the changing business environment and communication circumstances it is often too difficult to choose and ensure the appropriate behaviour, which leads to a failure in communication and thus also ruins possible or actual cooperation or partnerships.

As external relations specialists frequently work internationally, the making of an appropriate choice involves the application of culture-specific knowledge in order to make the communication models and styles appropriate for representatives of other cultures and effective for the employers of these particular specialists.

Recognizing cultural differences is the necessary first step to anticipating potential treats and opportunities for business encounters. But in order to go beyond awareness and to create useful interaction, these differences need to be open for discussion (Schneider, Barsoux, 2003).

For the purposes of the aforementioned, it should be ensured that specialists cooperating with foreign partners are as far as possible aware of the existence of the cultural differences, as well as are able to analyse their own personalities as regards their own cultural peculiarities and those of their partners of different other cultures in the result guaranteeing harmony and mutual understanding throughout the whole process of communication and cooperation.

A survey carried out in 2008 in order to assess the quality of the study program External Relations of Organizations shows that the competences needed most for the graduates in that particular year were foreign language and bookkeeping competences.

The need for cross-cultural communication competence was also noted to increase over years (even though it was not one of the vital skills at that time), as well as was reported to be insufficient, therefore the study course Cross-Cultural Communication was developed with the vision to start delivering it in 2010.

Such a decision is justified by the fact that the external relations specialists working in various companies in Latvia need to possess and continuously develop foreign language and cross-cultural communication skills in order to be able to successfully work in the particular field (Malinovska, Abele, Mezote, 2008).

Foreign language and cross-cultural communication competences are of importance for cooperation, of external relations specialists, with foreign partners and therefore should be present and accordingly developed along with the other competences mentioned in the Professional Standard of External Relations Unit Manager, but the author considers, as well as the surveys prove that specific competences that external relations specialists should possess change continuously due to the changing business environment and changes in communication and cooperation models, as well as due to the updates in the requirements for successful cooperation.

It should also be pointed out that the students' ability to communicate in an international environment has improved significantly, as the language barrier as an obstacle for cross-cultural communication tends to disappear or has disappeared (Turuseva, 2010).

The mentioned tendency proves that it is not necessary to boost the acquisition of foreign language skills, it should rather be contributed to acquiring more cross-cultural communication

skills (if not sufficient and in areas where not sufficient) due to the need to communicate cross-culturally in all areas of business today.

For the aforementioned purpose, it is vital to solve the problem of research that is typical of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and can be characterized by the fact that the acquired competences of external relation specialists working in Latvia today are no more sufficient, as the work responsibilities and competences needed for successful fulfilment of all of the changing tasks of the external relations specialists have changed requiring more cross-cultural involvement (which has not been foreseen during the development of the study program).

Due to this reason higher education programmes preparing specialists in Latvia in the field of external relations cannot anymore ensure adequate training and therefore should be adapted according to the market needs.

The problem can be solved by justifying the theoretical grounds for acquiring more cross-cultural skills by practical surveys – determining what particular new and more specific competences external relations specialists should acquire and improve at the present moment to be able to work in their field successfully along with the increasing level of each individual specialist's predetermined contribution to and involvement in the process of ensuring the expected successful cooperation.

For the aforementioned reason, the purpose of the research is to find out the competences necessary most for external relations specialists working in Latvia at the present moment, as well as to provide solutions for ensuring the acquisition of the necessary competences within the curriculum and also by means of extra curricular activities.

### **Methodology of Research**

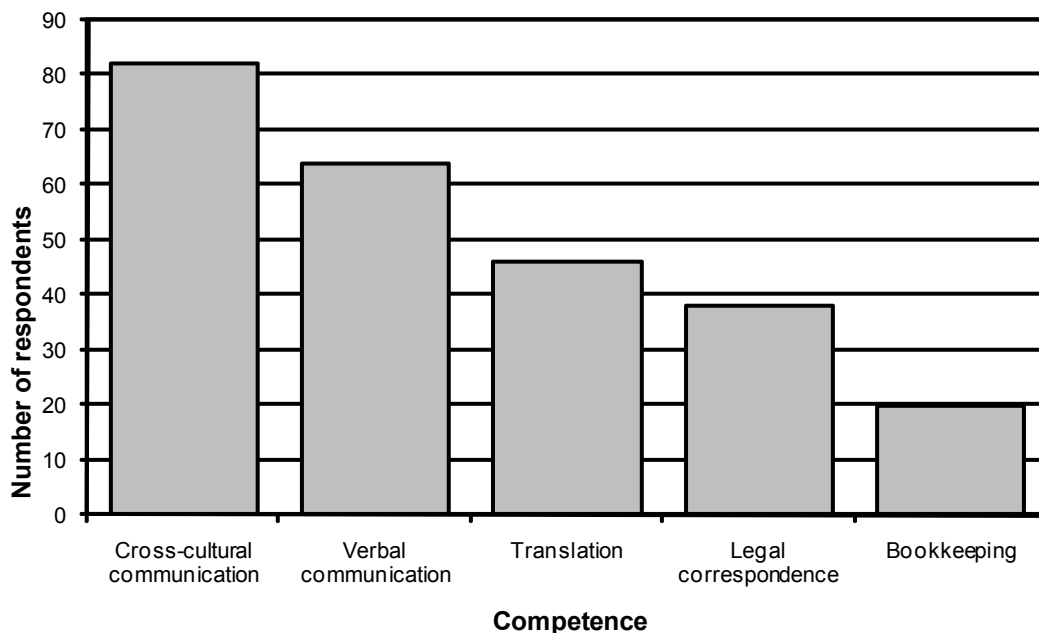
In the research, data obtained in 2011 from surveying the graduates of the study program External Relations of Organizations is analysed (the mentioned program is a bachelor's study program developed and implemented at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Latvia University of Agriculture; two communication related courses developed and delivered by the author: Cross-cultural Communication, Functional Communication).

In the survey (questionnaire), 108 graduates participated. Since the number of possible respondents is limited, there was no selection. Questionnaires stating that cross-cultural competence is most important were analysed further to find out specific skills that fall into this competence.

Data were analysed according to the percentage of the responses for each group of competences, revealing which competences are needed more than others. The most necessary group of competences was analysed in the same way more deeply. Analysis of qualitative data was performed as well.

### **Results of Research**

The results of the research show that cross-cultural communication competence and verbal communication competence are the ones to be far more needed for external relations specialists working in Latvia today than the other competences mentioned in the responses of the surveyed graduates (see Figure 1).



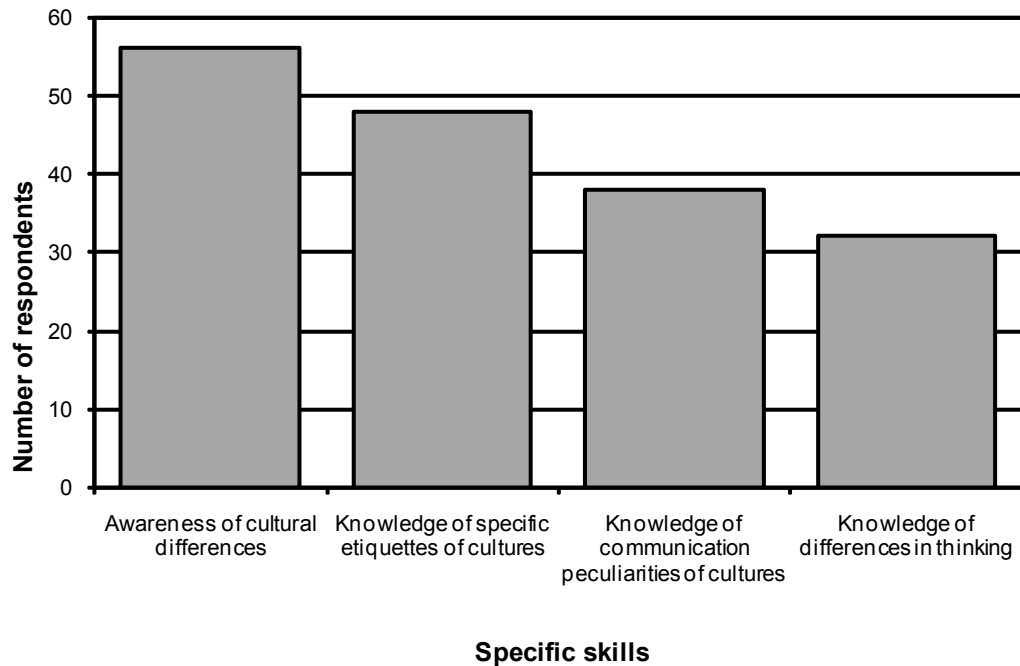
**Figure 1: Competences necessary for external relations specialists in 2011.**

The respondents were asked to state the competences they consider to be necessary most, so each respondent was allowed to mention several of them.

Other competences mentioned most frequently by the respondents included project management, advertising skills, work with information and communication technologies, specific software skills, managerial competence, office administration skills, legal knowledge, representation skills, presentation skills and others, but none of these competences was mentioned by more than 20 respondents.

The responses of the surveyed graduates reveal that within the most vital competence for their work, i.e., cross-cultural communication competence, several specific kinds of knowledge and skills fall, that should be learned, practiced and applied to successfully work in the external relations field today in Latvia.

The largest part of the surveyed graduates mentions awareness of cultural differences to be the most important skill among others, leaving the three other typical skills behind and providing some more other competences each of them typical of only a few of the respondents, which are not analyzed herein due to their specific character (e.g., differences in presentation manners, peculiarities of some specific cultures, etc.) related to the operations of the enterprises and organizations the surveyed graduate come from and either to particular regions of Latvia where the mentioned enterprises or organizations are located or to particular regions where the foreign partners of that particular enterprises or organizations come from (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Breakdown of skills necessary most within cross-cultural communication competence of external relations specialists in 2011.**

The surveyed graduates state to have understood that first of all it is necessary to be aware of the importance of the items to be learned, and only then it is useful to learn certain differences of specific national cultures. Many of the respondents acknowledge to have understood also that most of the problems in their cooperation with foreign partners have occurred while and until they had not understood the role of accepting cultural differences and had not been aware of them, adding that specific knowledge as regards etiquette and way of acting and thinking of certain cultures is only a matter of time and learning.

As regards the changes in competences necessary for external relations specialists, almost all of the graduates state that the competences to be possessed to successfully work in their field have changed. Among the skills importance of which has increased in comparison to past, cross-cultural communication skills, translation skills, ethical norms and understanding of business relations were mentioned most frequently.

### Discussion

Analyzing the list of the most necessary competences for external relations specialists, it can be judged that for these specialists to successfully work in Latvia in 2011 the most needed competences are to a large extent related to the usage of language and communication skills and cooperation with foreign partners, as cross-cultural competence and translation competence obviously involves cross-cultural activity on all occasions, and verbal communication and legal correspondence involves it frequently due to the cross-cultural environment which undoubtedly is a characteristic of a modern and active enterprise.

The leading role of cross-cultural communication competence among other competences (which rises due to changing business conditions – involvement of increasingly more foreign partners in business procedures) can also be interpreted as proving that cooperation with foreign

partners is the most important activity in the everyday work of external relations specialists in Latvia in 2011. At the same time it means that cross-cultural competence is vital among other communication competences needed to cooperate internationally.

In relation to L. Turuseva (2010), stating that the language barrier of the prospective external relation specialists is disappearing, now there can be observed a tendency for cross-cultural competence to serve as an obstacle for successful communication, as the skills are very necessary apart from verbal communication skills in general.

If compared with the need for cross cultural competence, verbal communication competence lags behind, proving the urgent need to improve the level of cross-cultural competence for the prospective specialists, as verbal communication competence is the one that, obviously, has been, is and will always be necessary for any kind of cooperation in an enterprise/organization and, if not as necessary as cross-cultural competence, only testifies to the vital importance of cross-cultural skills at the present moment.

As regards the specific skills that the respondents consider to be valuable within the development of cross-cultural communication competence, it is observed that the largest part of the questioned graduates consider awareness of cultural differences to be of most necessity. It can be explained by the fact that the main idea is to understand, accept and respect cultural differences, and, if that is typical of a particular individual, all of the other skills and knowledge can be acquired comparatively easily. Problems arise when individuals do not accept or recognize cultural diversity, as then they are not capable of behaving adequately even to the best of their knowledge. It means that cultural awareness should be raised during the process of studies more intensively, as well as afterwards certain etiquettes should be acquired by means of arranging extra curricular activities for cross-cultural communication, as within the study plan the possibility of acquiring the mentioned competences to a larger extent cannot be ensured. It would be useful to organize more international conferences, meetings with foreigners and other activities). In future, extra credit points for the study course cross-cultural communication or acquisition of culture related knowledge within other subjects might be of use. A useful way of ensuring the acquisition of cross-cultural competence would be provision of possibilities for students' internship in multicultural and/or international companies.

As the obtained data indicates to the dominance of cross-cultural competence, as well as communication competence in general and translation competence, it is advised to adapt the Professional Standard of External Relations Unit Manager to integrate the mentioned competences to a larger extent, paying the most important role to cross-cultural competence, so that a study course in these fields could be introduced and/or acquired to a larger extent in all of the similar programs implemented in Latvia.

For further research, it would be necessary to analyse the working environment of external relations specialists more deeply and to find out what specific skills apart from cross-cultural communication and what specific cross-cultural communication skills and sets of skills (and due to what reasons) are needed for cooperation with foreign partners (the main responsibility of external relations specialists), to elaborate a plan for development of competences necessary for international partnership of external relations specialists.

## Conclusions

The ability to communicate is a factor that determines an external relations specialist's success and, if the communication is organized on an international level, it must be based on cross-cultural competence which has to be acquired increasingly more.

The most necessary competences for external relations specialists to successfully work in their field of professional activity and to successfully cooperate with foreign partners at the present moment are cross-cultural communication competence, verbal communication

competence, translation competence, legal correspondence competence and bookkeeping competence.

Within cross-cultural communication competence, such skills as awareness of cultural differences, as well as knowledge in certain business etiquettes of various cultures and ways of communicating and thinking of particular cultures should be acquired more; there is no need to improve the process of acquiring language skills for the purposes of successful cross-cultural communication.

It should be studied what specific skills external relations specialists should acquire more.

To ensure successful development of cross-cultural communication competence and solve the problem of the insufficient cross-cultural communication competence of external relations specialists, the study plan should be amended by means of a) increasing the number of credit points for the study course Cross-cultural Communication from 3 to 4; b) ensuring the possibilities for students to practice cross-cultural activities apart from the classroom; c) providing possibilities for students' internship in multicultural and/or international companies; d) amending the Professional Standard of External Relations Unit Manager to integrate cross-cultural competence to a larger extent; e) promoting specific sets of skills that can be most useful in the today's business environment; f) elaborating a plan for the development of competences necessary most for international partnership of external relations specialists today on the basis of the sets of skills dominating at the moment.

The study course Cross-cultural Communication should be adapted by means of promoting cultural awareness and devoting more classes to acquiring specific business etiquette of different culture, as well as discussing the ways of communicating and thinking of various cultures.

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*Advised by Naglis Švickus, SMC "Scientia Educologica", Lithuania*

Received: January 21, 2012

Accepted: March 16, 2012

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