

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT THROUGH INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: In the contexts of global economy and the increasing necessity for sustainable development of the business connections all over the world, the relations between the partners often involves not only the foreign language communication but also the dialogue between their cultures. International economic activity takes place in a set of business environments (business arrangements, timelines, quality output, sales, cash flows) which are also largely determined by additional cultural business conditions (culture as communication, attitude towards power, organizational hierarchy, interpersonal relations, etc.). In this sense, intercultural dialogue is a particularly important tool for achieving excellence and sustainable business relations between economic partners from different countries.

In this paper, we suggest that intercultural dialogue in the international business environment is an indispensable tool for achieving economic effectiveness and goals, and can be assessed on the same scale as business performance. In order to identify the need of awareness-raising concerning the importance of intercultural dialogue as a business environment facilitator, a survey regarding the sewing industry in southwestern Bulgaria was conducted. The survey involved 16 small enterprises (participating with professionals from four different positions) working with firms from Greece. The evaluation of the business relations was actualized at two levels: the level of assessing the ability of professional communication and the level of assessing the ability of intercultural dialogue. Following the results obtained, the authors suggest a more active inclusion of intercultural dialogue in business practices and in negotiation. This recommendation fully corresponds to the Global goals of sustainable development because it contributes to the improvement of global partnership.

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Introduction

Sustainable development at the regional, national and international level is increasingly dependent on factors such as successful communication, positive business relations and dialogue between partners. Since aspects of intercultural dialogue can be found in all areas of political, economic, institutional, educational and social life, it plays an important role in this process as well. The 21st century has marked society as being global, i.e. it functions as a global society of knowledge and calls for sustainability of all kinds, especially in the realm of political, economic and cultural relations between countries.

The development of the Bulgarian economy over the last few decades has largely been determined by internal and external economic processes. Bulgaria strives to meet the requirements of the international market and to overcome the inertia from the former restrictions of its economic activity to the socio-political connections with the member counties of what used to be the Council for mutual economic assistance (CMEA). An additional obstacle for the optimal allocation of the Bulgarian economy on the international market is the disproportion between the different regions, which preconditions problems of the centre-periphery type. The stepping-up of European policies for technological development of the business subsectors is aimed both at supporting the national economy, on the one hand, and the private small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on the other. In this line, some governmental support is also provided, which hopefully will soon lead to sustainable growth of local and regional economies. The launch of initiatives supporting the SME sector is aimed at achieving a maximal economic knock-on effect at the regional, national and international level. This cannot happen without successful business relationships and dialogue between major and minor economic players, stakeholders and individual professionals with different economic activities. Along with the other structurally emblematic Bulgarian sectors, such as agriculture and tourism, the sewing industry is among the main sectors of production concentrated in industrial enterprises (textile and apparel production, production of facial care products, toll manufacturing). It is vital for the existence of the sewing industry in Southwest Bulgaria to work with international partners, especially those from Greece. As mentioned above, good relationships give a chance for these types of collaboration to become better economically positioned.

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The exchange of information as a global tool needs to take into account all the changes of communication in order to avoid the emergence of communication gaps. Such mistakes are very common in communication between partners from different cultures and these communicative failures themselves can give rise to misunderstandings and can cause a deterioration in business relations. In addition, under the influence of the individual corporate culture, a special type of professional communication is established which is performed in the context of specific business purposes. This communication not only reflects the level of linguistic competence of the business partners, but also includes a variety of interpersonal relationships and behaviour patterns.

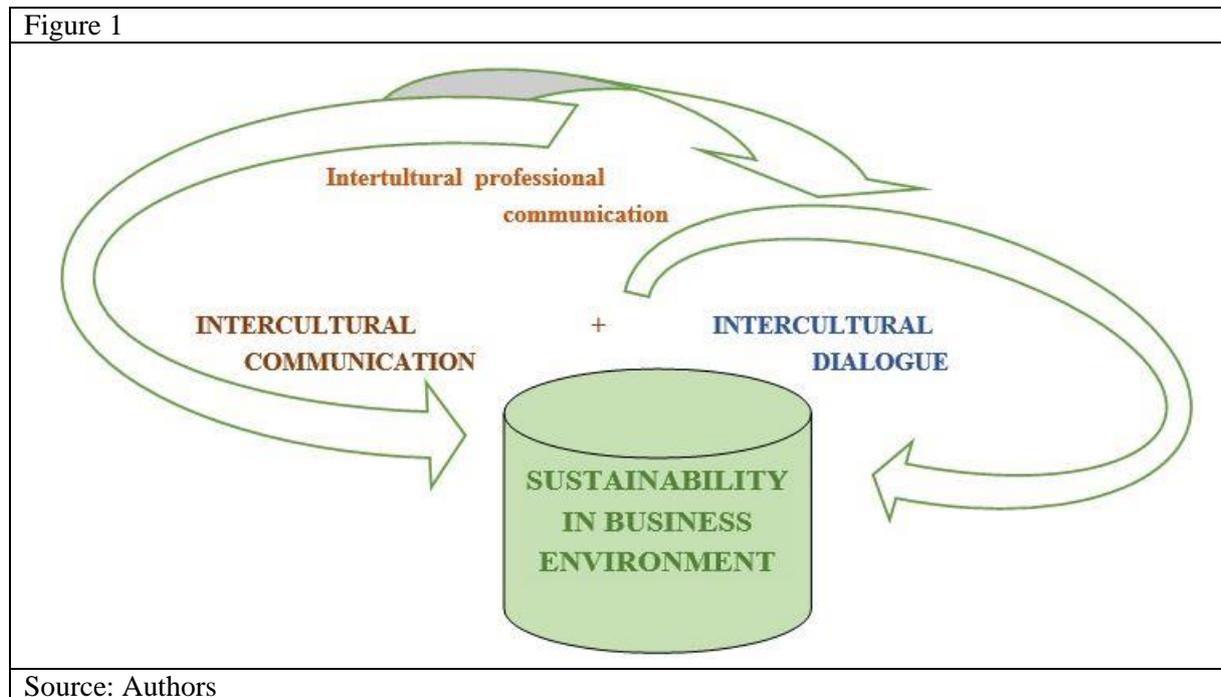
Therefore, we assume that a successful business partnership depends to a great extent on the effective performance of business communication between professionals from different countries, which we identify as an ability for intercultural dialogue. Within the chosen line of the research we postulate that intercultural dialogue in the economic environment should go beyond intercultural business communication. We admit its role “in terms of opportunities rather than risks”, as described by Ratzmann (2019: 42). Moreover, intercultural dialogue has a direct bearing on improving the effects of communication and business relations in general, because it can be used as a powerful “means for building mutual trust” (Pierini, 2012: 530). Analyzing the effectiveness of intercultural dialogue by designing criteria and indicators for its success can be seen as a measure which makes it possible to translate universal values. Intercultural dialogue can lead to sustainability in the business environment on the international scene. Since economic activity on the international market implies both the establishment of long-lasting relationships, as well as endeavours for financial sustainability, this type of interaction between the partners possesses financial expression.

The authors of the present paper claim that the dialogue between cultures is substantially influenced by both the ability for intercultural dialogue of each of the partners and their level of professional intercultural communication. The forms of this dialogue can be achieved not only by a foreign language, by professional (corporate/organizational) attitude, but also by intercultural behaviour patterns. Depending on the quality of each of these components, more intensive business relations can be achieved. For the present investigation and within the selected economic sector, we aim to analyze in more details the intercultural dialogue in the Bulgarian-Greek business relations (the sewing industry) and to investigate the way in which it can be supported (i.e. in view of the professional communication), so as to achieve sustainability on the given business. The importance of the present research can be first seen in light of the relation intercultural dialogue - professional communication in the business environment. The second significant contribution is the link to the Sustainable Development Goal Nr. 8 (*Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all*) and Goal Nr. 17 (*Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*). By adding the viewpoint of intercultural dialogue for being a relations building resource, the present research goes beyond the scope of the intercultural business communication studies and enters the area of intercultural management. Revealing issues from comparative empirical research, the topic relates to common value sharing and building trust in business relationships between economic actors, representing the Bulgarian and Greek business culture. However, some limitations should be noted. First, for the chosen economic sector, for the chosen area, the Blagoevgrad region, there were not many representatives working with Greek sewing firms that could participate in the study. Only 16 Bulgarian companies were included, whereby the overall number of the respondents was 32. The respondents hold employment positions as managers, corporate secretaries, technical staff and representatives from the supply department. The study was aimed at investigating the professional communication with their colleagues in the foreign firm, in the specific industry sub-sector and in regards of the intercultural dialogue occurring as a result of their business collaboration. Although this is a case of contact between two neighbouring countries, the future work can include participants from more countries.

Literature review

By addressing the issue of the importance of the business environment and in line with the third wave of globalization, modern business organizations are operating in a flexible manner and include a wide range of resources. To be able to survive in a dynamic and highly competitive environment business enterprises have to take a variety of measures to achieve sustainability. The fact that each business organization is acting not as a single operator but is included in international socio-economic

interactions raises the questions of how to manage communication between business partners effectively, and how to maintain good relations and constructive dialogue. Undoubtedly, this is a specific case of intercultural communication which fosters sustainability on an operational (professional) and on a communicative level. The awareness of the issues of the business communication that organizations carry out in the setting of intercultural encounters contributes to better coordinating information exchange and in the long run to establishing long-lasting business partnerships. Our present research concerns both intercultural communication (as process-oriented) and intercultural dialogue (as a result) and regards them as factors for sustainable development. Figure 1 visualizes our concept of intercultural dialogue as a factor of sustainability:



Numerous studies confirm the importance of competent and reliable communication between partners in international businesses (Elron, 1997, Baczynska & Korzynski, 2017, Evans et al., 2016, Salaman, 2003), but disregard its intercultural features. Other authors relate the communication process to multiculturalism (Bannò et al., 2011; 2016; Vevere & Sanikova, 2018), but do not include the dialogic nature of communication and therefore the result aspect of communicational remains neglected. In order to fill this research gap, the present study aims at investigating the intercultural dialogue in the context of business and by taking into account that communication in international business environment adopts the principles of mutual understanding and acceptance of otherness. Thus, communicating with foreign business partners inevitably transforms into communication with other cultures which in turn requires specific attitude to otherness. Moreover, international business communication must regard the characteristics of each national culture, including politeness, language usage and stereotypes (Feely & Harzing, 2013; Glajar et. al. 2005, Sava, 2017; Chankova, 2013; Hadjieva & Manova, 2018). Much in this vein, the specifics of each corporate culture (Yamashita, 2018) and role of communication as a managerial tool have to be considered as well (Kyurova, 2017.)

In view of the above, the authors claim that the world of international business is a multi-faceted one, constantly exposed to a variety of processes, dynamics, internationalization, intergovernmental relations, etc. Respectively, these relations shape the business communication, on the one hand, and provoke intercultural dialogue, on the other. Finally, intercultural communication is being created, and the cultural profile of the business partners follows the requirements of the multicultural society.

Moreover, additional needs demanding the harmonization of international business and cultural relationships occur, which is emphasized by various authors. It is further claimed that such actions will overcome the cultural differences in business. As a result, a sustainable business development and sustainable business relations in the regions are expected. An additional effect will be “the collaboration of individuals with different cultural backgrounds“ (Feldberga and Grike, 2015). In this

regard, it is not surprising that the theoretical-practical interest in issues related to cross-cultural management in international business is increasing (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Zhang & Zhou, 2009; Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007). All these efforts also confirm the role and importance of dialogue between cultures, including the aspect of legal culture (Stoykova, 2016).

Some other authors have explored and, in particular, have developed additional strategies to improve ways for mutual understanding. Of particular interest to us is the concept for scaffolding interpersonal relationships proposed by Zimina and Kondakova, whose strategy of accuracy and punctuality (Zimina & Kondakova 2015) has a special bearing on our research topic. Research by other authors (Eddleston & Morgan, 2014; Levunlieva, 2013) also reaffirms the role and importance of interpersonal relationships for achieving sustainability effects by means of establishing and maintaining both interpersonal and business relationships. Pietro (2014) also addresses the issue of time punctuality in the context of economic performance and proactive personality, job performance and job satisfaction in the international business environment.

In this connection, intercultural dialogue can be very useful, as it smoothens barriers resulting from different customs, manners, values and influences mostly visible in contact with other business environment where professionals with different cultural backgrounds interact. Possessing the ability of intercultural dialogue means making the business environment cultivated. Morozova (2011) pays special attention to the significance of intercultural communication and dialogue by postulating that they are represented on four different levels – the international, the national (regional), the corporate and the personal level. We agree with this statement, but we also claim that these levels exist in a kind of reciprocal relationship – if the communication qualities on the professional level are improved, it leads to improvement of the communication qualities on the other three levels. As a result, the type of communication that occurs is not only a communication for business purposes, but also a professional communication within specific intercultural context.

Additionally, when acting in the international business scene it will be beneficial for managers, entrepreneurs, employees and operators to be aware of the levels of intercultural communication and to know how to achieve a more successful intercultural dialogue in the business environment. From a general point of view, the intercultural experience can be considered as one of the main requirements of both the intercultural personality, on the one hand, and of the global businessmen, on the other.

Barett et. al. (2013) outline several indicators for the assessment of the intercultural personality: *ability to identify cultural and social differences, ability to function in a multinational community, ability to predict future trends and logic of their development, tolerance to national and racial differences, ability to adjust to new requirements of the changing environment, good communication skills with representatives of other cultures, good working knowledge of foreign languages and awareness of one's own culture as different from other cultures* (Barett, 2013).

For the sustainable business environment, it is finally very important that there are conditions for communication and dialogue for a productive interaction. For this reason and in view of our research, to this set of requirements we also add the following ones: *ability for direct and indirect intercultural communication, ability for formal and informal intercultural communication, ability to adapt to a foreign cultural environment, ability for business communication, ability for international business etiquette, ability for corporate responsibility*.

By considering the mentioned requirements for successful intercultural communication in the business environment, the requirements of specific intercultural business dialogue also appear to be a relevant precondition. In our opinion, the better the understanding of the intercultural communication processes is, the greater the ability of the organization for intercultural dialogue. Better results with foreign partners may be achieved, since intercultural dialogue is not only a subject of the communication act itself, but it is also concerned on developing interactions, mutual respect, stimulating the employees in the given business organization for specific foreign cultural norms, value orientations and attitudes within the organization. In this context, sustainability arises, following the principles of mutual understanding and intercultural behaviour.

As the ability for intercultural dialogue between business partners and representatives of different cultures is always a multifaceted process, it is also relevant to focus on the interrelation between the three types of dialogue - dialogue between people speaking different languages and having different

foreign language proficiency, dialogue between representatives of cultures which may be culturally distant, and dialogue between professionals varying in their hierarchy of job levels.

The scope and content of the term intercultural dialogue is far from being clearly defined. Still, as claimed by Suci, Nagu, Mateescu (2014), intercultural dialogue “is mostly identified with: cohabitation, connections and relationships between different cultures within a society where people need to feel well represented“. The problem of assessing the ability for intercultural dialogue using indicators is not sufficiently presented in scientific literature. An attempt to postulate indicators of intercultural dialogue between individuals, civil society groups, community representatives has been made by Kochoska. She defines the capacity for intercultural dialogue as one of the important capabilities of the personality in the global world. She correlates this ability with the array of the following conditions: equal dignity of all participants; voluntary engagement in dialogue; a mindset (on both sides) characterized by openness, curiosity and commitment, and the lack of a desire to “win“ the dialogue; readiness to look at both cultural similarities and differences; a minimum degree of knowledge of the distinctive features of one's own and the other culture; the ability to find a common language for understanding and respecting cultural differences (Kochoska, 2015). Perrini's position is that intercultural dialogue should be in favour of mutual understanding and that it should lead to overcoming stereotypes, improving mutual respect, empathy and, finally, reducing political, social and cultural tensions (Pierini, 2015).

In our opinion, the known toolbox can be adapted for the purposes of our study but first we need to define the scope of intercultural dialogue in the business environment. We suggest the following definition: *Intercultural dialogue in the business environment is a result-oriented exchange of communicative behaviour for business purposes and happens between representatives of different cultures and organizations in terms of respectful attitude towards cultural otherness, acceptance of foreign value orientation and responsibility for common business collaboration.*

We assume that the ability for intercultural dialogue in the business environment can be explored on the basis of the following indicators (without ambitions to tackle all possible components): *knowledge of the main features of one's culture, openness for interaction, respect for the other's culture, understanding of cultural differences, religious tolerance, ability to express oneself in a language that one feels comfortable to use.* These indicators, in our view, are essential in terms of their performance in the business environment. We include these indicators in a survey on sustainability in the business environment through intercultural dialogue.

Data and Methodology

The present study is based on the analysis of survey data, gathered from a questionnaire distributed among representatives of 16 small sewing companies in Southwestern Bulgaria in the period of August – December, 2018. The study respondents from every company had different employment statuses. There were managers, company secretaries, technicians and representatives from the supply departments. Only employees who have direct contact to the foreign business partnering organization in Greece participated in the survey, which had a limiting impact on gathering the distributed questionnaires. A total number of 32 respondents was achieved. The survey included the assessment of research questions regarding the abilities for intercultural dialogue in the context of the business environment and in the previously mentioned economic sector in the Bulgarian and Greek national cultures.

The method of the respondents has been used because of its adequacy in terms of the specificity of both research objects and in view of the data being sought. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, divided in two parts: the first part was related to the respondents' profile (gender, age, position in the firm); the second part outlined the respondents' opinion regarding the intercultural professional communication gained from 5 questions, and 4 more questions focused on the ability for intercultural dialogue.

Respondents assessed each of the components of the intercultural professional communication and each of the abilities for the intercultural dialogue needed for a sustainable business environment with foreign partners. They were asked to rate the significance of the given indicators for intercultural professional communication and for the skills for intercultural dialogue on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from Extremely Important (= 6) to Not Extremely Important (= 1). The aim was to prove if

there is a statistically significant difference in the mean values of the intercultural professional communication appointed by business professionals, on the one hand, and for the abilities for intercultural dialogue, on the other hand. The data distribution analysis applied the classical one-way ANOVA test. Given the objectives of this research, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H_0 – There is no statistically significant influence between the level of intercultural professional communication and the ability for intercultural dialogue;
- H_1 – Differences in the level of intercultural professional communication have a significant influence on the ability for intercultural dialogue.

To determine the relationship between the level of intercultural professional communication, which is the factor x_i , and the ability for intercultural dialogue, which is the result y_i , a single factor regression analysis was applied.

To determine the strength of the relationships between the intercultural professional communication and the ability for intercultural dialogue, a correlation analysis method was also applied, and a Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the dependence between them. Finally, the coefficient of determination was calculated.

Results and Discussion

The profile of the respondents is constituted as follows: 12 of the respondents were female and 20 of them were male (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender		
	Gender	Share, %
	Male	62.5
	Female	37.5

Source: Authors

Over half of the respondents were between 35 to 45 (75%), and 18.8% of the respondents were between 46 and 55 years of age and only 6.2% were over 55 years of age (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by age		
	Age	Share, %
	35 to 45	75.0
	46 to 55	18.8
	over 55	6.2

Source: Authors

Regarding the position taken, the share of managers (66.2%) was followed by the share of the corporate secretaries (18.8%). The share of technical staff (12.5%) was also significant. The representatives from the supply department were only a few (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to occupation in the company		
	Occupation	Share, %
	Manager	66.2
	Company Secretary	18.8
	Technical staff	12.5
	Representatives from the supply department	2.5

Source: Authors

For the purposes of the research, it was interesting to consider the frequency rate of communicating with the foreign business partner. The survey results showed that the largest number of respondents (37.5%) communicated twice a week and approximately (31.5%) professionals contacted their partner once a week. It is noteworthy that only 6.2% had minimal contact with the foreign partner, it was enough for them to communicate only once a month.

Regarding the language used, 56.2% of the respondents declared that their communication was in English, 12.5% used both English and Greek and 31.3% communicated in Greek (Table 4).

	Languages used	Share, %
	English	56.2
	English and Greek	12.5
	Greek	31.3

Source: Authors

Issues of special interest were not only the foreign language and the frequency communicating rates, but also the type of communication itself. For 75% of the respondents, direct communication is *very important* when exchanging information. Additionally, 81.3% identified indirect communication as a *very important* requirement for successful business communication.

The role of the business etiquette in the intercultural business environment has not been well researched, so as to be able to answer all questions related to sustainability in the intercultural business environment. When asked to identify the importance of business etiquette, 12.5% of respondents identified business etiquette as an *extremely important* condition for a successful intercultural communication. The majority of respondents (62.5%) rated business etiquette as *very important* (Table 5).

	Importance	Share, %
	Extremely important	12.5
	Very important	62.5
	Of average importance	25.0

Source: Authors

It is quite clear, that intercultural communication suffers from the lack of knowledge related to a variety of behavioural patterns and relationships, one of which concerns punctuality and tolerance. In our study, we analyzed the extent of tolerance against failures to comply with deadlines.

A significant share of respondents considers the need for such kind of tolerance negative - for 75% of the respondents there is no need for such tolerance. These results are based on the following evidence: the features of business processes abide by the old business axiom time is money, where the loss of time and delays result in economic damages for business and clients. It is therefore crucial for partners to respect all kinds of deadlines. The business actors are usually aware of that fact, so this may be the reason why they have rated low this aspect of intercultural professional communication.

In order to achieve better business performance many of today's modern business organizations stimulate intercultural behaviour by various methods (i.e. by demonstrating socio-cultural and ecological engagement). A well-known and widely applied technique is team building or any other kind of activities in an informal environment (mainly for improving communication and motivation at the workforce). In this respect, 31.3% of the respondents assess the importance of informal meetings as *extremely important* and 55.3% rate them as *very important* (Table 6).

	Degree of importance	Share, %
	Extremely important	31.3
	Very important	55.3
	Of average importance	13.4

Source: Authors

The way of performing the business processes inevitably affects the professional communication style and can be regarded as a means for the intensification of business contacts. When questioned to what extent the professional communication style is important for the intercultural dialogue, 25% of the respondents determined its significance as *extremely important* and other 62.5% determined its significance as *very important* (Table 7).

It is also crucial for firms to establish an intercultural dialogue that mostly fits with their business profile. According to the majority of respondents (81.3%), the most important feature of the intercultural dialogue in business environment is the intercultural professional communication. This

gave us a good reason to investigate in particular whether the differences in the level of intercultural professional communication have a significant impact on the ability for intercultural dialogue.

Table 7: Distribution of respondents according to importance of the professional communication style for the intercultural dialogue		
	Degree of importance	Share, %
	Extremely important	25.0
	Very important	62.5
	Of average importance	12.5
Source: Authors		

The results from the dispersion analysis of the impact of respondents' mean values of the intercultural professional communication on the mean values of the ability for intercultural dialogue allow to see whether the impact of intercultural professional communication is significant or not significant. The estimated value of empirical feature was the Fisher coefficient or $F_{em} = 28.46$ with a theoretical value of the Fisher criterion at a level of significance $F_t = 3.07$. Therefore, $F_{em} \geq F_t$, which justifies the rejection of the null hypothesis and, hence, the alternative hypothesis that the differences in the value of the assessments of the level of intercultural professional communication have a significant influence on the assessments of the ability for intercultural dialogue was confirmed.

The obtained positive coefficient of the regression analysis was $b = 0.77$ which testified to a positive relationship between the assessments of the level of intercultural professional communication and the ability for intercultural dialogue. Hence, an increase in the mean value of the intercultural professional communication by a unit will lead to an increase in the mean value of the ability for intercultural dialogue by 0.77.

The calculated value of the Pearson's correlation coefficient was $R_{yx} = 0.95$ and verified that there is a strong correlation between the level of intercultural professional communication of respondents and their ability for intercultural dialogue.

Through the value of the determinant coefficient which had a value of 0.9025 it was found that a significant part (90.25%) of the total changes in the variable level of the ability for intercultural dialogue is due to changes in the variable intercultural professional communication.

Conclusion

In view of the conducted research on the intercultural dialogue in the business environment of the sewing industry in southwestern Bulgaria, and the results achieved it can be concluded that it supports studies directed at the significance of intercultural interaction on the international scene. The given scope has been extended by the notion of successful intercultural professional communication by interacting interculturally, or as stated here by the ability for intercultural dialogue. Thus, the discussion goes a step further giving the intercultural communication an economical line of argumentation (the case of the sewing industry). On the other side, the present research enriches the field of multiculturalism, cultural diversity, international diplomacy and civil society by delivering concrete dimensions and parameters (i.e. the *importance of the professional communication style for the intercultural dialogue*). The main results can be summarized in several points ways. First, the advantages of knowing and applying the principles of intercultural professional communication (such as styles and norms of formal and non-formal communication, business etiquette, understanding the different perception of behaviours and interaction with colleagues and professionals from other cultures) do exist, and as it has been shown by the study that they should include: *a need for a mutual understanding in a business environment and in an intercultural setting, a need for a greater awareness of the principles of the professional communication and awareness of the given intercultural communication style in the business organization*. The achieved results also confirmed the proposed hypothesis that there is a strong correlation between the professional communication of the managers (i.e. other professionals responsible for the business communication with international partners) and the ability for intercultural dialogue. Much in this vain, the chosen direction of investigating intercultural dialogue through the intercultural professional communication provided suggestions on how to sustain intercultural dialogue and thus to support cultural diversity in the business environment. It can be therefore concluded that the competent professionals, economists and

business operators nowadays must acquire the competencies and abilities of the intercultural personality and to be competent in both professional and intercultural dialogue.

From this point of view, the existence of a specific intercultural professional communication is confirmed, and its importance for both employees and employers is re-affirmed.

Through the style of intercultural professional communication individuals act in a friendlier and more dialog-oriented manner, despite differences on a cultural, national and economic level.

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