

# Awareness and Perception of Intercultural Competence among Expatriates Living in Slovakia

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<https://doi.org/10.53465/EDAMBA.2022.9788022550420.238-251>

**Abstracts.** In an age where connections around the world have become commonplace, intercultural competence is undoubtedly a valuable asset. Every day, both at work and in private life, we encounter people from different countries and cultures who are likely to hold different values and beliefs than we do. It is for this reason that intercultural competence is important - and essential in today's world. The present paper focuses on the perception and awareness of intercultural competence among expatriates living in Slovakia. In the first part of the paper, we discuss the theoretical concepts of intercultural competence. In the practical part, we evaluate the results of a questionnaire that aimed to determine the awareness and perception of CQ among expatriates living in Slovakia. The main findings, among others, show that despite the importance of the topic, expatriates in Slovakia do not consider themselves interculturally competent, as well as that they are not provided with sufficient training in this area on the employer's side. The paper concludes with practical recommendations.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, expatriates, cross-cultural adjustment

**JEL:** M14, D83, Y80

## 1 Introduction

It is estimated that labour migration will increase with the increase in globalisation, due to the fact that developed countries will experience a shortage of skilled labour in certain age categories of the working population. This will require more migrant labour to fill the gap. With increasing globalisation, the world can expect to see even more migration of workers across international borders, especially from lower-income countries to higher-income countries. The term migration is also associated with many challenges that expatriates face when changing their home country. For expatriates to integrate seamlessly into a new cultural environment, it is important that they possess certain intercultural knowledge and skills that will make it easier for them to operate in a new culture. Slovakia is one of the countries where the

number of foreign residents is relatively high due to the fact that many international companies and corporations outsource their business activities from Slovakia. Significant changes in the management of corporate processes and especially the application of lean management have led to the increasing use of outsourcing in the search for ways to reduce costs. The simple form of delegating non-core activities to an external supplier has become popular also thanks to the fact that it allows companies to prefer their core business, to perform the most important activities more efficiently and to focus on innovative development. According to data from the end of 2021, as many as 53,770 foreign entrepreneurs own business entities in Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> This is also one of the factors which is the reason for the relocation of foreign workforce to Slovakia. According to the statistics of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, as of May 2022, 21,758<sup>2</sup> third-country nationals with an employment permit in the Slovak Republic and 30,696 citizens of EU/EEA countries with an information card are working in Slovakia. According to HRL (Human Rights League), it is estimated that more than 10% of the capital's population is made up of foreigners<sup>3</sup>. As integration into a new culture brings with it certain challenges, the present article will discuss the importance and awareness of intercultural competence among expatriates living in the territory of the Slovak Republic. Based on quantitative methods, in the form of a questionnaire, we will try to find out what the awareness level of this phenomenon among expatriates who have decided to operate in Slovakia is, whether they have sufficient knowledge about intercultural competence, despite the fact that this competence is taken for granted among foreigners. Last but not least, the aim of the paper is to raise awareness of this issue in Slovakia, which would facilitate the integration of foreigners into the Slovak cultural and working environment.

## 2 Theoretical and conceptual background

### Cultural intelligence (CQ) of an expatriate

CQ is a concept that has evolved within a specific research paradigm, namely multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Earley and Ang (2003) introduced the concept of cultural intelligence (CQ). The authors define it as an *individual's ability to function effectively in situations that are characterized by cultural diversity*. Cultural intelligence can also be defined as *a person's ability to understand cultural differences and be able to manage them in different cross-cultural settings* (Ang et al, 2007). Intercultural competence is considered to be a type of mental process that incorporates *what, when, why and how* is related to culture. Cultural intelligence provides a platform for an individual to seek answers to questions related to cultural differences and further enables an individual to think, understand and behave in a cross-cultural environment. Triandis (2006) argues that CQ can be achieved if an individual avoids judgement until

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<sup>1</sup> finreport.sk

<sup>2</sup> upsvr.gov.sk

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they acquired sufficient information. Thus, if a person has high cultural intelligence, they can function effectively not only within any culture but also across cultures (Ng & Earley, 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, CQ has four dimensions: (1) metacognitive; (2) cognitive; (3) motivational and (4) behavioural (Earley & Ang, 2003). Gooden, Creque and Chin-Loy (2017) state that these dimensions can be mutually reinforcing, and in some contexts, a particular combination has a significant impact on overall CQ.

**Metacognitive CQ** refers to the mental processes that individuals use to acquire and understand cultural knowledge, including knowledge and control over individual thought processes regarding culture. It includes strategic planning prior to intercultural interactions, adapting cultural knowledge when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds, and monitoring the accuracy of cultural knowledge during intercultural encounters.

**Cognitive CQ** refers to expatriates' universal and culturally specific knowledge regarding the practices, norms, and conventions of different cultures. It also reflects their knowledge regarding different social, cultural, legal, and economic systems.

**Motivational CQ** is essential because it reflects expatriates' ability to engage in greater cultural learning (Xu and Chen, 2017). It involves a natural preference for interacting with people from different cultures, confidence in culturally different interactions, and coping with the stress of adjusting to unfamiliar environments. Individuals with high motivational CQ focus attention and energy on intercultural situations based on intrinsic interest and confidence in their intercultural efficacy.

**Behavioural CQ** refers to the ability of expatriates to perform cultural nonverbal and verbal activities when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds (Lin, Chen, & Song, 2012). It means having a flexible and wide range of behaviours. An individual who has higher behavioural CQ is generally accepted by the associated group, which leads to better interpersonal relationships.

#### Emotional intelligence (EQ) of an expatriate

EQ and emotions are reported to play a key role in the intellectual functioning of expatriates (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). The concept of EQ was first proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who defined it *as the enduring ability to understand, manage, identify, and use emotions, and subsequently use them in cognitive processing*. They divided EQ into three categories: (1) the appraisal and expression of emotions (in self and others); (2) the regulation of emotions (in self and others); and (3) the use of emotions in problem solving (i.e., creative thinking, flexible planning, motivation, and redirecting attention).

Evaluating and expressing emotions helps expatriates recognize the emotional reactions of others and develop a sense of empathy. Emotion regulation helps expatriates recognize their own and others' moods. This ensures estimation, control, and regulation of emotions. Using emotions to solve problems means that individuals with positive emotions can recall information that can help them solve problems creatively.

### Cross-cultural adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to the level of psychological comfort an expatriate enjoys in the host culture (Salgado & Bastida, 2017; Black & Gregersen, 1991). The literature specifies the following domains of intercultural adjustment (ibid): (1) adjustment to the general environment (level of comfort with general living conditions such as diet, medical facilities, and climate); (2) adjustment to interacting with the host country's citizens; and (3) adjustment to work (job and supervisory responsibilities and performance standards). Black's (1988) model of cross-cultural adjustment has been widely used in various studies.

The first category of cross-cultural adaptation includes factors that affect expatriates' daily lives, such as food, driving, shopping, living conditions, health care, and cost of living. The second category refers to the comfort level of expatriates in interacting and communicating with host nationals in different settings. Finally, the third category of cross-cultural adjustment is defined as the level of adjustment of expatriates with respect to their work and work environment (ibid). Cross-cultural adjustment is a primary and temporal outcome of expatriate assignment that can influence more distant or secondary expatriate adjustment such as job satisfaction, job strain (Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003), performance, and organizational commitment.

## **3 Methodology**

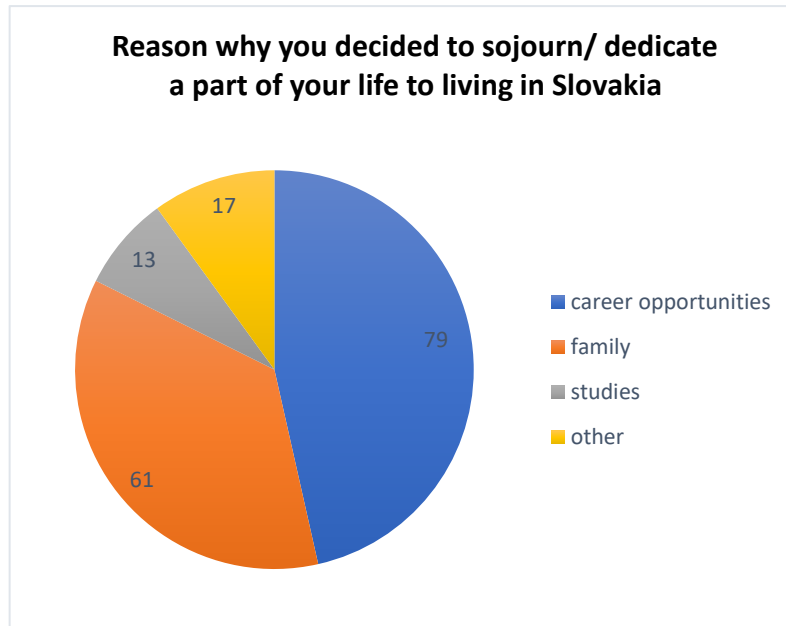
In the present article we focus on the awareness and importance of intercultural competence among expatriates living in the Slovak Republic. In the previous part of the article, we defined the basic theoretical and conceptual basis that serves for a better understanding of the issue under study. Of course, there are several approaches and perspectives on defining the concept, but due to the limited scope of the article and its needs, we have chosen the above theoretical approaches. As for the practical part of the paper, we have chosen a quantitative method in the form of an online questionnaire to investigate it. The aim of the questionnaire is, among other things, to find out whether expatriates working in Slovakia have sufficient knowledge about intercultural competence, despite the fact that this competence is taken for granted among foreigners. Last but not least, the aim of the paper is to raise awareness of this issue in Slovakia, which would facilitate the integration of foreigners into the Slovak cultural and working environment. In total, 170 expatriates participated in the questionnaire, which included open-ended and close-ended questions. After checking the completeness of the submitted data, we did not find any discrepancies and all responses were taken into account when processing and evaluating the results. The survey was conducted during the month of June 2022. Among other things, we tried to find out whether employers provide expatriates with sufficient training in this area and, last but not least, whether expatriates consider Slovakia to be an expatriate-friendly country, what the main pitfalls and obstacles, from the foreigner's perspective, await expatriates after their

arrival in Slovakia. Due to the variety of answers, we took into account those that appeared 10 or more times in the answers. Questions that occurred less than 10 times are not included in the charts, however, can be used to draw conclusions in the last chapter.

## 4 Results and discussion

### Reason why you decided to sojourn/ dedicate a part of your life to living in Slovakia

The first question we asked the expatriates was about the reason why they decided to come to Slovakia. As we can see in the chart below, one of the main reasons why expatriates come to Slovakia and decide to work there is *job opportunities* they have on the Slovak labour market. As mentioned above, Slovakia is one of the countries where the number of expatriates is relatively high due to the fact that many international companies and corporations outsource their activities from Slovakia. It is this option that is attractive for foreigners if their home country does not provide them with sufficient job opportunities or financial remuneration that they can be found in Slovakia. The second most common reason given by expatriates was *family*. In some cases, respondents also mentioned both options, i.e. job opportunities and family. 8% of the respondents (13) mentioned *studying* as the reason for their stay in Slovakia. We assume that in this case, these are Erasmus students who have been in Slovakia for a certain period of time. In this case, only the future will tell if they decide to stay in Slovakia. 17 respondents, representing 10% of the respondents, gave *other* as the reason for their stay in Slovakia. The most frequently given answers in this category were: *internships*, *voluntary activities* (ESC programme: a programme which helps young people from Europe and programme countries to develop their sense of solidarity by participating, either individually or in group, in non-profit, unpaid voluntary activities.). Respondent number 51 even gave "*better quality of life*" as the reason for choosing to live in Slovakia.



**Source: the author based on his findings**

**What do you understand under the term "intercultural intelligence/competence" (CQ)?**

With the second question, we sought to find out whether expatriates working in Slovakia have an awareness of what the term *intercultural competence* means. The question was asked in the following form "What do you understand under the term "intercultural intelligence/competence" (CQ)?", and the respondents could insert their answers. For the purpose of this paper, we decided to select a few of them that we consider relevant and may help us to better understand the issue under study. Cultural intelligence (referred to as CQ) is a relatively new phenomenon that was first defined by Ch. Earley and S. Ang (2003) as "a person's ability to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity".

Respondents provided the following answers:

- how people understand the unwritten social etiquettes;<sup>4</sup>
- skill to function effectively in culturally diverse settings;

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<sup>4</sup> The answers are given in an authentic form, only the grammatical aspect of the answers has been edited if the answer required it for better understanding.

- skills and aptitudes that allow an individual to adapt to cultural environments different to his/her cultural baseline;
- being able to see the other culture, what is different from mine for example, and what is special. Also once knowing it, being able to include these new habits into mine, and being able to navigate with them and around them. For example, during a conversation, once knowing it then one can avoid a misunderstanding;
- intercultural intelligence, is a term that is used for the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings and consists of different dimensions (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural) which are correlated to effectiveness in global environment (cultural judgement and decision making, cultural adaptation and task performance in culturally diverse settings);
- it's first time I see this term. My first guess is that it means awareness and open-mindedness about culture other than your own. Ability to accept and appreciate cultural differences;
- understanding and adapting to the local culture;
- functioning effectively in diverse cultural situations;
- never heard it before;
- the fact that one has enough experience abroad to make him able to adapt to any new culture he is in, be understanding to the people's traditions and values, and tolerant to their communication which might sound disrespectful to other cultures;
- not much but associating it with terms EQ and IQ, I assume cultural awareness;
- how to be culturally aware around a certain group/culture and the perception.

In general, we can confirm that the majority of respondents answered this question correctly, or if they were not familiar with the term, they were approximately correct in their guesses as to what it might mean. Surprisingly, there were also some answers where the respondents had never heard of the term (some of the answers are listed above). It is this fact that even some expatriates are not aware of the concept that can lead to misunderstandings in international encounters, as this competence involves one's ability to adapt effectively to a new cultural context and to use knowledge of a given cultural environment. One of the components of CQ is the cognitive level of intercultural competence. It is this component that relates to how an individual understands the similarities and differences between cultures.

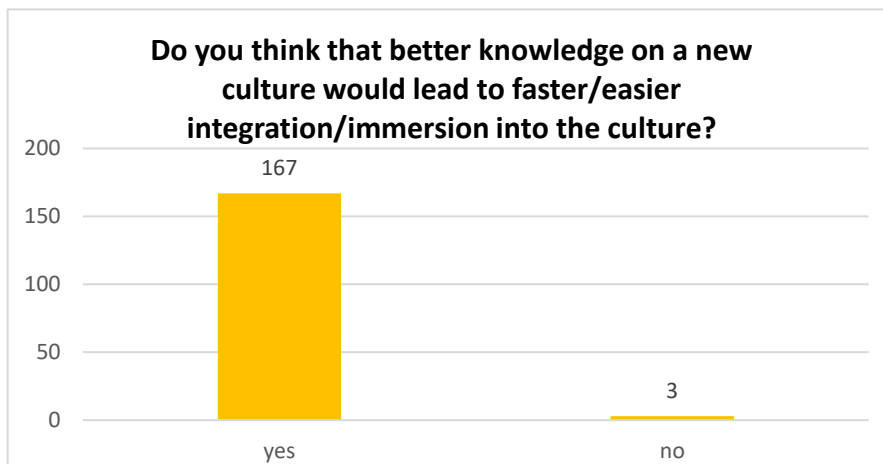
**Have you ever experienced a pleasant/unpleasant situation while staying in Slovakia that was caused by not knowing/ not having sufficient knowledge on the culture/local habits?**

In the next question, we tried to find out if the respondents ever experienced a pleasant/unpleasant situation while staying in Slovakia that was caused by not knowing/ not having sufficient knowledge on the culture/local habits.

It is this question that is related to the model of intercultural competence (cognitive component) that we described above. Regarding the answers of the respondents, we can conclude that most of the respondents did not have unpleasant experiences that were caused by their lack of knowledge about the culture. Some respondents, such as respondent number 78, reported a problem with communication *"Not really but sometimes struggle with communication"*. In some cases (respondent number 23) this situation was facilitated by intercultural training which provided the respondent with the necessary information about Slovak culture *"I had intercultural training before, but sometimes I still had difficulties accepting certain habits. No negative experiences though by not knowing."*

**Do you think that better knowledge on a new culture would lead to faster/easier integration/immersion into the culture?**

Through the following question, our intention was to find out whether respondents consider intercultural competence as an important element that can help expatriates to better integrate into a new culture. As we can see in the chart below, almost 100% of the respondents indicated *yes* as an option, meaning that they consider intercultural competence as an important element in integrating into a new culture. Based on this response, we can confirm that expatriates are aware of the importance of intercultural competence, and its role in integrating into a new culture.



Source: the author based on his findings

**On the scale from 1 to 10, how would you assess your cultural competence? (1 being an expert, 10 being very poor)**



Although the respondents are aware of the importance of intercultural competence, we were interested in how they would rate their level of intercultural competence. The respondents could choose a level on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represented the best rating and thus the respondent has excellent knowledge in this area. On the other hand, option 10 meant that the respondent has only basic to poor knowledge of the subject. Surprisingly, as many as 63 respondents thought that their level of intercultural competence was close to the "inadequate" rating. This may be due to the fact that despite being aware of the importance of CQ, the respondents do not possess sufficient knowledge and competencies required in an intercultural setting and thus lack confidence in their own skills. 7 respondents would rate their CQ at level 9, which represents very poor skills. On the other hand, 41 and 18 respondents think that their CQ level is at a high level and hence they are able to function effectively in an intercultural environment. None of the respondents rated their intercultural competence at levels 1 and 10.

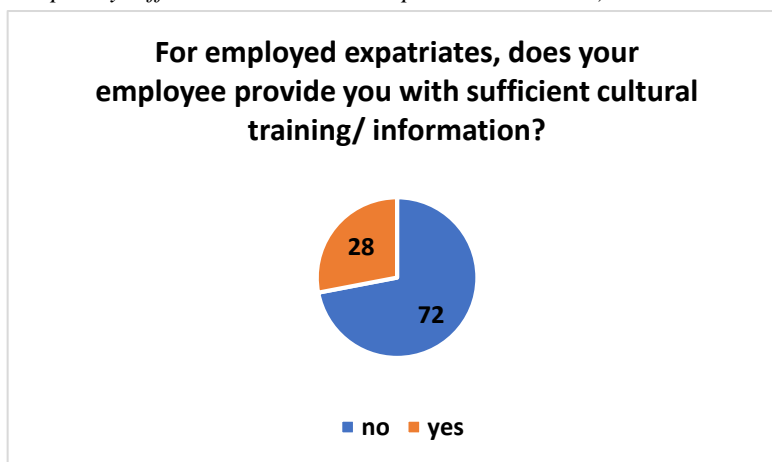


**Source: the author based on his findings**

**For employed expatriates, does your employer provide you with sufficient cultural training/ information?**

The following question was for employed respondents solely. The aim was to find out whether foreigners working in the Slovak Republic are provided with sufficient training in this area. We believe that intercultural training provided also by employers could help expatriates to better integrate into the working environment and cultural milieu. As far as the work environment is concerned, intercultural training could help to improve workplace relations as well as the efficiency of employees. As stated by Matveev (2017), intercultural competence is a critical characteristic in achieving effectiveness abroad, also in successful international management, in completing international projects or studying abroad, as well as in coping with intercultural

encounters in the home environment. Most expatriates feel that their employer does not provide them with sufficient information or cultural training. As respondent number 65 stated *"Not really, there are nice initiatives, but when it comes to realisation they are far away from planned."* When evaluating this question, we have to underline the fact that foreigners did not mention their employer's or company's name. We assume that international corporations, since they employ the most people with different cultural backgrounds, try to provide sufficient information to their employees. However, this assumption has to be proved, maybe in the future research. As an example, we quote the answer by the respondent number 78 *(Yes, I work for an international company, a completely different world when compared to Slovakia.)*

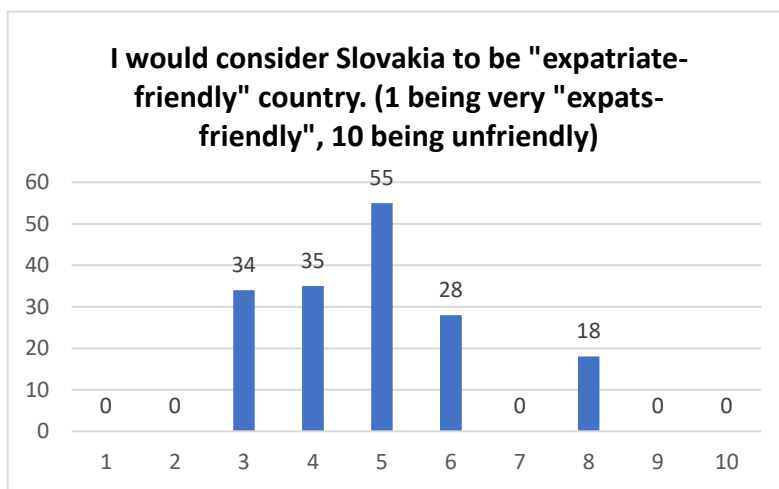


**Source: the author based on his findings**

**I would consider Slovakia to be "expatriate-friendly" country. (1 being very "expats-friendly", 10 being unfriendly)**

In the following question, we tried to find out whether expatriates perceive Slovakia as an expatriate-friendly country. Surprisingly, we found that the majority of respondents consider Slovakia to be a *neutral country* in this respect. From this, we can conclude that this issue is highly topical and therefore it is important to discuss and inform/educate also Slovak citizens about it. We have also encountered similar opinions, which support greater awareness of this issue in Slovakia, from respondents number 34 *(Thanks for the questionnaire, this is important topic here, in Slovakia.)* or respondent number 23 *(Please promote cultural awareness and competence. Also, for Slovaks working with foreigners, needs adaptation from both sides)*. Most respondents also agreed that one of the biggest problems they experience as a foreigner in a new country is *the language barrier*, as an example we quote the answer number 42 *(thank you for this question. As an expat I experienced isolation from cultural life in Slovakia, here is quite a challenge to find proper information about cultural events and institutions without knowing the language. At the same time, a lot of foreigners prefer*

*not to study the language, because it's quite hard and you can always explain basic things in English or German. So I see quite a lot of foreign people in Slovakia who are educated and cultured, who are looking forward to some cultural activities, or who can make a quite good impact on Slovak cultural life, because of their skills in music, arts, fashion, filmmaking, edutainment and so on and so on, but they just don't have an infrastructure or any source of information about how to make themselves useful.) It is the lack of information in the English language as well as the availability of this information that act as factors that make it difficult for foreigners to integrate into our culture.*



**Source: the author based on his findings**

## **5 Conclusion and recommendations for practice**

Cultural intelligence opens up opportunities to interact with different cultures by cultivating a sense of flexibility, tolerance and acceptance of diverse cultural traditions that are stimulating, motivating and ultimately make one a better and more aware global citizen. It is possible to use CQ to leverage differences in the workplace to become a mechanism for change and more meaningful cross-cultural adaptation regardless of host country. In our increasingly interconnected and globalized world, intercultural competence is increasingly important. As we already mentioned in the article, it is essentially the ability to communicate effectively across cultures and to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. There is no doubt that intercultural competence is a valuable asset in this day and age when connections around the world have become commonplace. Every day at work and in our private lives, we come into contact with people from different countries and cultures who are

likely to have different values and beliefs to our own. This is where intercultural competence comes in handy - and in today's world, it is essential.

In essence, intercultural competence can be defined as the ability to develop focused knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to observable behaviours and communications that are effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions. Thus, the essential characteristics of intercultural competence are *knowledge*, *skills*, and attitudes. Intercultural competence is particularly important for people who have decided to start their lives in a new country. Therefore, in the present article we discussed the importance and awareness of intercultural competence among expatriates living in Slovakia. Based on quantitative methods, in the form of a questionnaire, we were able to find out that among the main factors why expatriates decide to come to Slovakia are *job opportunities*. HRL came to the same conclusion when in their survey they found that up to 34.7% of foreigners cite employment and 23.5% business as the purpose of their stay in Slovakia<sup>5</sup>. Thus, these two categories can be merged into one group, i.e. *employment and career opportunities*. From the above, we can conclude that the main reasons for which foreigners decide to immigrate to the Slovak Republic are *job opportunities*, followed by *family*. Another of the findings we were able to identify is the fact that despite the relevance of the topic, not all expatriates were aware of the term *intercultural competence*. Based on this finding, we would recommend that more attention be paid to this topic, both on a personal and professional level. We believe that employers should provide employees with sufficient quality training in intercultural competence, communication, etc. for example, in the form of training, workshops, discussions, etc. This issue is addressed in Slovakia by Benčíková D. (see Benčíková 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017). We cannot forget about the teaching of intercultural communication at universities, not only foreigners who come to a new culture, but also permanent residents of Slovakia, should have intercultural competence, which leads to mutual understanding and understanding of the individual actors of social interaction. A surprising finding was that the majority of respondents did not consider their knowledge in the field of intercultural communication to be sufficient. This fact may as well lead, from a practical point of view, to the fact that the process of integration into a new culture is hindered. One of the forms that could help to increase the knowledge and skills of intercultural competence of expatriates in Slovakia would be the aforementioned intercultural trainings and better information about this phenomenon. For this reason, we again call for increased awareness of the issue. Greater attention should be paid to this topic from school days onwards. As far as expatriate workers are concerned, we believe that employers, whether they are international companies or small and medium-sized enterprises, should invest in quality intercultural training. The fact that integration into the Slovak environment is not always easy is also indicated by the last question in which the majority of respondents rated Slovakia as a neutral or more negative country in relation to expatriates.

In conclusion, we would like to state that our research was largely limited by the fact that it was conducted using a web-based survey. It would be appropriate to use other scientific, especially qualitative methods in the form of individual in-depth

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<sup>5</sup> hrl.sk

interviews. However, the nature and content of our research allowed us to use quantitative methods, and to obtain data for future research that we would like to pursue. In the end, we can confirm that our goal has been met, and we hope that the article will be an inspiration for other researchers, as well as for ordinary people dealing with the topic of interculturality.

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