POWER Webinar “Cross-cultural communication startups – students”

Date: 31/10/2019

Goal: to provide comprehensive insights to enable high quality experience for intern hosting startups and students

Host: Kristīne Bērziņa, University of Latvia

Webinar speakers: Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa and Annija Apsīte, University of Latvia

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa has been working in talent search since 2008 for different companies from Financial Services, Manufacturing, Retail, IT & Telecommunications, Pharmaceutical for all three Baltic States. Academic and research background at the University of Latvia and other European universities relates to organisation behaviour, innovations and cross-cultural aspects.

Annija Apsīte has been working in startups for 7 years, currently is PhD student and teacher, academic and research area is related to organisational behaviour, social media strategy development.

Topics: Working and communicating with trainees from different cultures, Working with non-EU interns, Trainee selection process.

Annija Apsīte: When it comes to collaborating with people from different cultures, what is the thing you should start with? What is the first step?

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: The first essential thing is to start to be aware of your own culture, your own cultural values. We usually stick to what we are used to and seeing that others are different might cause some problems. We have to understand that we are judging them from our point of view. Sometimes maybe it’s our own upbringing, our culture that makes us think others are different or hard to collaborate with. That is basically our opinion. It is important to understand that we are biased because of our own culture. We think some things should be like that and not any other way. We have to understand it is our bias and we think we are somehow better than others, which is not true. That’s kind of the basics of cultural intelligence to understand what we feel and why we feel such things.

Annija Apsīte: Basically it’s being aware of your own cultural conditioning. When you are aware of yourself, you can try to see the other person in a different perspective.

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Yeah.

Annija Apsīte: And usually when we make some kind of decisions we are basing them on our values. We have to understand that the other people are probably not wrong, they just have different cultural conditioning. So maybe you can point out some particular issues or things that people usually have problems with?

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Yeah, I think the topic here is on the collaboration within startups. I think currently it is a given that you are going to collaborate with people from other countries. First of all, people who come from these cultures have a different understanding of status. In Asia status is much more important and it is based on your age and family credentials. Whereas in the West we are used to status being based on our own knowledge and achievement. This brings us to a problem in intercultural communication, at least what I’ve heard from some of my colleagues in startups, they encounter people from Asia often. But sometimes Westerners think that they are lying. But it is based on what is seen as appropriate in certain cultures. They are very reluctant to say no and show you disrespect. And in fact not only showing you disrespect, but also losing their face, so to say, or their incompetence. This may lead to some misunderstandings. I know a situation where a startup had a person from Asia where initially the person had said they have a certain experience, but in reality not quite so. But again it’s not because the person is unreliable, this might be a cultural issue where the person doesn’t know something and they don’t know how to ask. This might result in a problem if left unaddressed.

Annija Apsīte: So basically what you are suggesting is to try to test the person with practical tests before you hire them in order to be sure that the employee or trainee matches the company. And is it important to try to understand if the person really understands you? Very often I think I understood something correctly, the other person thinks so too, but at the end of the day we are both very surprised at the result.

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Another cultural issue is that we value the context around communication differently. Certain cultures are the so-called low context cultures, so we usually are more direct. We try to say what we mean and mean what we say. Whereas Oriental cultures have the so-called high context. So it is important to understand the whole context that you have in the conversation. Because people from these cultures will not tell you directly or disagree with you directly. With people from Asia or Oriental cultures we have to be very careful and notice non-verbal signals. We must not expect that they will argue with you directly. For example, in Japan they don’t use “no” much, if they don’t agree with you they will say: ”yeah, let’s see, we’ll think about it, maybe”. But they will never say no. And if you say “maybe” to the Westerner, they will understand it more like “yes, there is an opportunity, some things will be done”. This is about the context we try to bring when dealing with miscommunication. So it’s not only understanding we have, different perceptions, but also the way we express our thoughts can be different. This brings us to the topic of giving feedback. With some people you can be very direct, but with others you have to be careful how you give them any negative feedback. People might connect it with their personality. If you say that someone is not doing their job, they might relate it to themselves thinking that they are not a good person because they are not doing a good job. This is also important to learn.

Annija Apsīte: When it comes to leadership it also is very different among cultures. Especially nowadays it is very typical and trendy to be open, trustful and give a lot of autonomy to your employees or trainees. And the research shows that it does give a motivational boost that you can make decisions on your own. However, it’s not really the case in Asian cultures. If your leadership is very down to earth or if the power distance is not so high, you might be perceived as incompetent or weak. When it comes to leadership it’s also very important to understand how it relates to cultural differences. There is no single pattern that works for every single culture of the world. Maybe you can give some suggestions, especially theoretical resources? Where should I look for more information into this and what specifically to look for?

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: If I had to suggest only one source it would be Hofstede’s work. He provides very good descriptions about cultural differences. He bases his work on a lot of scientific data. He makes it simple to understand. But we have to be careful to not put people into boxes. They are all like that and we are like this. Oversimplified. I think Hofstede is excellent in explaining it much more in depth and provides us with some information that can be used as a map on how to navigate working with different people.

Annija Apsīte: Maybe there’s something that’s universal or something you can take away from this, that you can always remind yourself. Some suggestions?  
Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Yeah. We already started with the most important thing in the beginning of this interview, which is to first be aware of yourself and your cultural background. We have to pay attention to how we see the world and then we can allow others to do the same understanding that they are also acting according to their culture unconsciously. But also each individual is very unique and when we talk about cultural differences we are speaking about how the average person from such and such culture acts. If I could give some advice to startups, I would say when recruiting their employees or trainees regardless of the culture where a certain person comes from. I think the most important thing to look at is the locus of control. This idea comes from psychology and distinguishes less successful and more successful individuals. It shows how a person takes responsibility for their own actions, how they see their future and what they do. People with internal locus of control think they always can affect the processes and the outcome. They really take responsibility for their actions. This is very important. Also, in my own recruiting career this is a primary indicator. People with external locus of control tend to think that their events are controlled by other factors and so they tend to blame others, which I would not suggest for startups as an employee or trainee.

Annija Apsīte: So from complaining to owning. One good quote: “If you don’t see yourself as a part of the problem, then you can’t be part of the solution”.

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Yeah, exactly. In relation to startups it’s also important to note how people relate to failure. In startups often things don’t work out as planned. We have to look at how resilient a person is to setbacks and failures. Of course, the majority of startups will fail. So it is of value how persistent a person is, how able a person is to stand up again, how vigilant they are. If you are able to continue to fight, it signals how much in general a person is successful and an excellent employee or trainee regardless of how that startup will do in the future.

Annija Apsīte: Attitude towards failure is also conditioned, it’s not something we are born with. Very often we hear parents say: “oh, you did this and you did that”. We think it’s normal to judge yourself doing wrong things. But actually, if we accept and learn from this experience, It becomes an opportunity and not a threat. The second thing is that we indeed should take failures not as something that diminishes our value, but actually something that makes us richer with experience and ability to react appropriately to situations that might arise.

Ilona Baumane-Vītoliņa: Yeah. Also if you are afraid of something you won’t be able to deal with it accordingly, but if you are ready to approach it regardless of the outcome, the fear disappears.