

Intercultural Competences in the French Financial Services Companies

Miloš Petković*¹

¹ Singidunum University, Faculty of Business, Belgrade, Serbia

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore public corporate news related to the topic of intercultural competence (ICC) in 4 French companies in the year of 2018. In order to answer the research question, a computerized lexical content analyses were done of 424 separate news (texts), with 243,146 words. The research model generated a bottom up clustering on keywords, titles and abstracts. The examination of the data concentrates on 4 main clusters of news that focus on (1) motivation as an affective component - desire to cooperate with strangers, (2) knowledge as a cognitive component - understanding and awareness, (3) skills as a behavioral component - personal ability to engage behaviors, and (4) financial performance as a final success result - companies' ability to gain competitive advantage and create future value. A transversal review of the four clusters reveals that ICC as a portfolio of specialized competences whose complementary intellectual resources are crucial for the companies' value creation process is insufficiently present in the communication practices. ICC as a part of human capital is a key companies' resource for creation of future value and should be therefore more considered in companies' communication practices. The article contributes to the current literature on ICC narratives. It seeks to provide explanation of which ICC components companies focus most on in order to gain competitive advantage and financial performance.

Key words: *intercultural competence; company performance, financial services, France*

JEL Classification: M14, L25, F23

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, the business and global environment have progressively been transforming into a knowledge-based, fast-changing, technology-intensive environment in which investments in human resource, information technology and research and development have become essential for the purpose of improving a company's competitive advantage and final performance (Canibano et al., 2000). Itami and Roehl (2009) suggested that resources consist of physical, human and monetary resources which are necessary for business operations to take place and information-based resources, such as management skills, knowledge, technology, consumer information, brand, reputation and corporate culture.

The services sector, particularly, relies on knowledge or, more precisely, on the set of employee's competences (Vargo et Lusch, 2017), as they are intangible goods. Intangible capital such as technology, relationships with customers, brands, working culture, together with human capital influence on company's value creation processes, production of cash flows and profits

* E-mail: mpetkovic@singidunum.ac.rs

(Bessieux-Ollier et al., 2014). It was a matter of interest to understand how the companies of this sector develop their human resources' competences, and especially the intercultural competence (ICC) (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Waxin & Barmeyer, 2008; Bartel&Radic, 2009; Barmeyer & Davoine, 2012). The interest in studying this topic lies in the fact that employees' competences and human capital are the main drivers of companies' competitiveness in the modern economy (Radivojevic et al., 2019). However, even though the research has taken interest in studying the acquisition of the transnational human capital and thus of the ICC (Gerhards & Hans, 2013), it has mainly been focused on the acquisition of this competence on an individual level, as an emerging component of the human capital (Bartel-Radic, 2009). The study deals with the topic of ICC, understood as part of company's intellectual capital or, on a broader level, human capital (Gerhards & Hans, 2013). The study is based on the theory explaining communication between people from different cultures, developed by Gudykunst (2004). As a matter of fact, it is expected that the selected companies, as they provide services, focus on developing the competences of their human resources. More specifically, they focus on developing their ICC, with respect to their international presence.

The aim of this study is to make the lexical content analysis whose value lies in covering corporate news of one intellectual capital intensive and high-technological industry such as financial services industry in France. These analyses give the opportunity to list and sort all relevant terms with respect to their commonalities, to define clusters of news articles on the basis of these commonalities and to map them according to main topics related to the ICC in such an international environment as it is in the selected companies. Based on the understanding of the literature on ICC, it was proposed a transversal review of the four clusters in which the topic of ICC predominantly appears as a set of specialized competences and thus as part of the human capital that is decisive for the future value creation processes. The sample is composed of 4 biggest and sole French financial services companies on the Paris Stock Exchange for the business year 2018. In the research paper, the lexical content analyses are implemented in order to answer the three main research hypotheses: (1) do the selected companies diffuse about ICC; (2) if they do diffuse, about what do they talk about; and (3) if they do diffuse, how often or in which percentage.

The paper first presents, in the section 2, the extant literature on human capital to introduce the review of studies conducted on ICC. Section 3 explains the data and research methodology used to develop the lexical content analysis dedicated to map the corporate news on ICC in the multinational and international working environment as it is in the observed companies from the sample. Section 4 explains the findings, i.e. the identification of key components of ICC in the analyzed corporate news, and section 5 discusses the results, proposes a conclusion and draws some suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of company's human capital

Human capital refers to tacit and explicit knowledge that all employees possess and that can generate a future value (Martín-de-Castro et al., 2011). Hsu and Fang (2009) stated that human capital contains all business capital that lies in employees and that is not owned by a company. This capital can be taken out of a company and it includes employees' and managers' competences, skills, knowledge, attitudes, wisdom and commitment. Based on the work of Martín-de-Castro et al. (2011), human capital has three dimensions, together with included variables:

- 1) Knowledge – Includes the following variables: formal education, specific training, experience and personal development.
- 2) Abilities – Include type of knowledge related to know-how: individual learning, collaboration-team work, communication and leadership.

- 3) Behavior – Includes knowledge that leads individuals to do their tasks: having a sense of belonging and commitment, self-motivation, job-satisfaction, friendships, flexibility and creativity.

More innovative and successful companies focus more on its intellectual capital, specifically on the human capital and other components that results with comprehensive competitive advantage. This is also the case even when a company relies intensively on knowledge and skills of its employees to generate better earnings and productivity. The information about its importance within a company might allow for human resources to be more effectively allocated, which would then enable the identification of gaps in skills and abilities of employees. This sense gives much better image to current and potential investors (Albertini et al., 2021). Purkayastha et al. (2021) investigated the role of human capital in a company's future goals for internalization. Company's human capital education and experience support further international expansion. It is important to follow a different contribution and influence of intellectual capital components on the company's final result because it does not each component influence the same (Pap et al., 2021). The study by Petković et al. (2020) proved a positive relationship between intellectual capital and its components on the final company's financial result. You et al. (2021) explored the importance of human capital in developing new products. The study emphasized the company's learning on the development of human capital and innovations. The findings prove new insights into how human capital can be linked with fostering innovations.

However, companies do not tend to publish or present their indicators of human capital externally because of a high risk of losing talented employees to competitors. Managers in companies are more focused on usefulness of human and customer (relational) capital, than structural (organizational) capital indicators. It was emphasized that even though the data on the human capital are published in the annual reports of companies, in the part of historical costs, they do not provide a more realistic image of the company, in particular of value creating elements on the long-term. Also, due to the fact that accounting recognition of intellectual capital is missing, there are difficulties to implement different managerial tools for measuring, describing and presenting intangibles (Bessieux-Ollier et al., 2006).

Intercultural competence: a set of knowledge, motivation and ability

In order to integrate into the professional world and to survive, they must demonstrate, in addition to the technical skills required in employment, new general skills that guarantee their adaptability, versatility, autonomy and effectiveness (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006; Lancry & Lemoine, 2004) and constantly update their knowledge (Lainé, 2004). It is a process of intercultural learning, consisting of several stages specific for each individual, as it is depending on his/her personality and international experience (Bennett 2004; Waxin & Barmeyer, 2008). Therefore, according to studies done on this dynamic character of the ICC (Chen & Yang, 2014), the number of stages varies from one individual to another. According to some authors (Bennett, 2004; Fritz, Möllenberg, & Chen, 2002; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), it is more appropriate to consider this intercultural learning as the acquisition of an intercultural sensitivity. This means that individual develops his/her sensitivity when meeting with foreign cultures, until he/she becomes interculturally competent. In other words, there is a shift from a strong attachment to his/her original culture (ethnocentrism) to the acceptance of other cultures (ethnorelativism) which requires a process of intercultural learning through six stages. After a phase of denial (1) (refusing to accept that the differences between cultures exist) and defense (2) (believing one culture superior to others), individual reaches the stage of minimization (3), when he/she becomes aware that differences exist, without changing his way of seeing the Other. This ethnorelativism begins in the fourth stage, with accepting the culture of integration (4) and finding some positive aspects in it. It is important, according to Bennett (2004), not to confuse acceptance with assimilation, which would be the act of "melting" into a culture by abandoning one's own. To accept a culture would be to increase one's well-being. Thus, the individual adapts

(5) to the mechanisms of culture until integrating it (6), namely until being able to work in a new context.

Because of its multiform nature, ICC can be defined as a situational adaptation (Bartel Radic, 2009), a means of negotiation or a cognitive capacity (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2008), a means of solving problems, or personal development (Wang & Kulich, 2015). It can be considered as an intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005) that enables an individual to function effectively in diverse cultural contexts (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012) and makes him culturally intelligent (Ang et al., 2007). Some studies have found that ICC is a set of self-knowledge (knowing one's habits, emotional states, prejudices and reactions when working with others), social skills (knowing how to establish a relationship of trust with others, the ability to listen, to inspire confidence), cultural awareness (knowing one's own culture and codes, language and body language, non-verbal), and the culture in which one lives); knowledge of the organizations or micro-universes in which one works (school, university, hospital ...) and their rules (Dusi, Messetti, & Steinbach, 2014). ICC is a set of competences, such as: emotional (acquisition of empathy, knowing how to put oneself in the place of the Other), cognitive (acquiring knowledge of intercultural management to understand the specificities of different cultures) and behavioral competence (the result obtained after two initial phases: the individual integrates his knowledge into his behavior) (Barmeyer & Davoine, 2012; Waxin & Barmeyer, 2008). Similarly, Gudykunst (2004), who developed a theory explaining the ICC, considers that the latter is composed of the following three categories, each containing four elements:

1. Knowledge, defined as the awareness (understanding) of what needs to be done in order to communicate appropriately and effectively. It comprises:
 - 1) knowledge of how to gather information: searching for information or deeper understanding (strategies: passive, active, interactive)
 - 2) knowledge of group differences: strangers identify with their groups so they can feel their self-concepts are not being confirmed if we focus only on similarities
 - 3) knowledge of personal similarities: at the group and the individual level
 - 4) knowledge of alternative interpretations: minimize misunderstandings/maximize the similarity;
2. Motivation, defined as a desire to communicate appropriately and effectively. It comprises:
 - 1) need for predictability: we do not see strangers' behaviors' predictable
 - 2) need to avoid diffuse anxiety: lack of balance, feeling uneasy, tense, worried, fear of negative consequences
 - 3) need to sustain our self-conceptions: consequence of high anxiety is that need to sustain our self-conceptions becomes important
 - 4) approach-avoidance tendencies: group inclusion
3. Ability to engage in the behavior necessary to communicate appropriately and effectively. It comprises:
 - 1) ability to tolerate ambiguity: deal successfully with situations even when a lot of information needed to interact effectively is unknown;
 - 2) ability to manage anxiety: if anxiety is too high, we are not able to communicate effectively
 - 3) ability to empathize: involves cognitive, affective and communication competence (carefully listening to strangers; understanding their feelings; being interested in what they say; being sensitive to their needs; understanding their points of view)

- 4) ability to adapt communication: requires both cognitive and behavior skills; adaptation of interaction goals; ability to adapt to the requirements posed by different communication contexts; assumption that perceptions of communication competence reside in the dyad.

For the purposes of the research, we based the analysis of our corpus on Gudykunst's model. The next section explains the methodology adopted to analyze the corporate news of selected companies.

METHODOLOGY

The research study is based on a top-down approach with specific keywords included that can be further grouped in more specific sub-clusters. The approach is considered appropriate to better understand how the text from the corporate news is structured and how it includes the components of ICC.

Data sample explanation

The research study relies on the corporate news in order to explore narratives on the topic of ICC. The corporate news is publicly available and published on the official websites for the 2018 business year. The sample included 4 companies from the CAC 40 Paris Stock Exchange list. The list included four sole companies from the financial services industry: BNP Paribas, AXA, Crédit Agricole, Société Générale. The observed financial services industry belongs to the high technology industries that are highly intellectual capital intensive (Francis & Schipper, 1999).

Content analysis by textual statistical software

The presence of specialized textual statistical software is becoming more important in the procedure of qualitative data analysis. It was proven that the IRaMuTeQ provides rigor qualitative textual data analysis (Ramos et al., 2019). The main objective is to identify how words group to each other in a text segment, and then how they compare with other text segments. Co-occurrence analysis is significant because it gives a final meaning of the observed words (Ocasio and Joseph, 2005).

The computerized lexical content analysis was applied within the study with the IRaMuTeQ software because of the sample size, with 424 separate news, and in total 243,146 words. This method allows an opportunity for measuring strategic intentions through the textual analysis of the topic addressed in the corporate news.

Formatting the text corpus

The corpus consists of the news of four companies (AXA, BNP Paribas, Société Générale, Crédit Agricole) published on their websites in 2018. Building the corpus consisted of copying the body of the text in a Word document, which resulted in 514 pages.

The analysis of the corpus in the software is possible thanks to the dictionaries available in IRaMuTeQ. They help lemmatize the texts by conserving only the infinitive forms of the verbs and singular forms of the nouns, so that the software can classify the words into semantic categories. The analysis carried out is threefold, as presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

Firstly, a step-by-step procedure (from phase 1 to phase 3, the order of the phases has an impact on the processed results) and selection of items from the following criteria are executed. The content analysis consisted of three phases:

are representative of the terms “work” (1) and “initiative” (2): (1) “One of the challenges on a daily basis is to get people or departments that don’t usually communicate with each other to work together. You have to be able to get people together and create cohesion within the group, to get each person to see the shared challenges that will help them to collaborate.”; (2) Present in 73 countries, BNP Paribas has been supporting for many years several initiatives aimed at encouraging professional and social integration of young people; such as Dream Up, the international arts educational program for underprivileged young people”.

In other words, this first level of analysis allowed to identify the categories that are more likely to be receptive of the components of ICC. By the way, the semantic clouds in the Figure 1 show us that Category 1 and Category 2 have some shared notions as they appear close to each other on the graph, whereas Category 3 and Category 4 are clearly separated. To obtain a more precise image of the categories 1 and 2, representing together 50.8% of the corpus, it was carried out a second level of analysis.

Phase 2: Creating a sub-corpus from the initial corpus

The second lexical content analysis consisted of the excerpt of the sub-corpus containing categories 1 and 2, which produced a four-category classification (Figure 2).

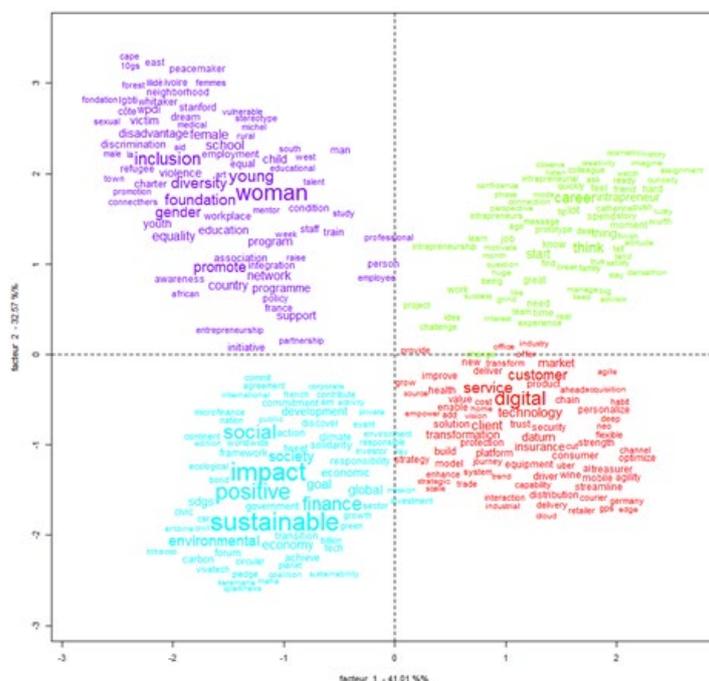


Figure 2. Creation of sub-semantic clouds from initial corpus

Source: Author's calculation

Table 2. Categories revealed in the phase 2

| Category | Color code | Name | % of forms analyzed |
|------------|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| Category 1 | Red | Digital | 22.4 |
| Category 2 | Green | Career | 27.1 |
| Category 3 | Turquoise | Environment | 29.5 |
| Category 4 | Purple | Diversity | 20.9 |

Source: Author's calculation

This level of analysis gave a clear classification of the words into 4 categories, that were named Digital (Category 1), Career (Category 2), Environment (Category 3), Diversity (Category 4).

Category 1 dealt with the topic of customer experience relying on the digital technology, as it gathers terms such as digital, service, customer, technology, client, market, transformation. Category 2 makes extensive use of the career semantic field through the following notions: think, career, start, intrapreneur, job, work. Category 3 covered the topics related to the environment (impact, sustainable, positive, social, environmental, development), whereas Category 4, the least representative one in percentage (20.9%), covered several aspects of the diversity (woman, inclusion, young, diversity, foundation, gender, promote, school, equality, female, etc.). Finally, this more granular analysis allowed to clearly separate the topic of diversity and to isolate it for a deeper understanding, to be able to analyze its components and the ones of the ICC necessary to address them efficiently.

Phase 3: Identifying the components of the ICC in the cluster diversity

Finally, the phase 3 was necessary to clearly separate the elements of the diversity that the analyzed companies use in their communication practices to address this topic. It was important to understand what semantic fields are used the most to raise the topic of diversity and at what degree this is an important topic for the multinationals.

The results show that there are 4 semantic categories that were named Equality (Category 1), Youth Education (Category 2), Awareness (Category 3) and Entrepreneurship (Category 4), among which the Category 2 has the highest percentage (37%), and the Category 3 the lowest (16.9%).

Category 1 gathers notions such as equality, gender, female, man, staff, male, global, global, heforshe, top progress, parity, etc. The following sentence illustrates the topic of the category: "In order to advance gender equality, BNP Paribas also takes active part in studies and research work. The group participated in a survey conducted by BVA for the CESP (Superior Council of Professional Equality) and organized an internal colloquium on sexism in the workplace. The group also published the "Agir contre le Sexisme" ("Take Action against Sexism") kit, designed for all employers."

In Category 2, the companies deal with the topic of education for young people and make an extensive use of the notions young, person, youth, refugee, integration, project, social, education, student, etc., as represented in the following sentence: "McGill came a close second with their idea for HER (Higher Education Right) Bonds to provide low cost loans to make it possible for low and middle income young women in India to access higher education."

Category 3 clearly put at the forefront of the list the awareness as the quality to develop to understand the commitment to social problems such as gender-based violence and integration of employees with disabilities, employment discrimination or stereotyping in the workplace. The following sentence illustrates how companies consider resolving these problems: "If we are to combat every form of employment discrimination, I first need to change the way I see each other. The goal is to go beyond stereotypes and focus solely on the professional skills of each candidate. That notably means raising awareness among employees at the company, particularly among employment staff."

Finally, Category 4 tackles the subject of entrepreneurship. The notions that represent this category are entrepreneur, program, Stanford (partnerships with Stanford University that organizes trainings, workshops and intensive classes for women entrepreneurship), wealth, business, opportunity, meet, week, workshop, mentor, connected, etc.

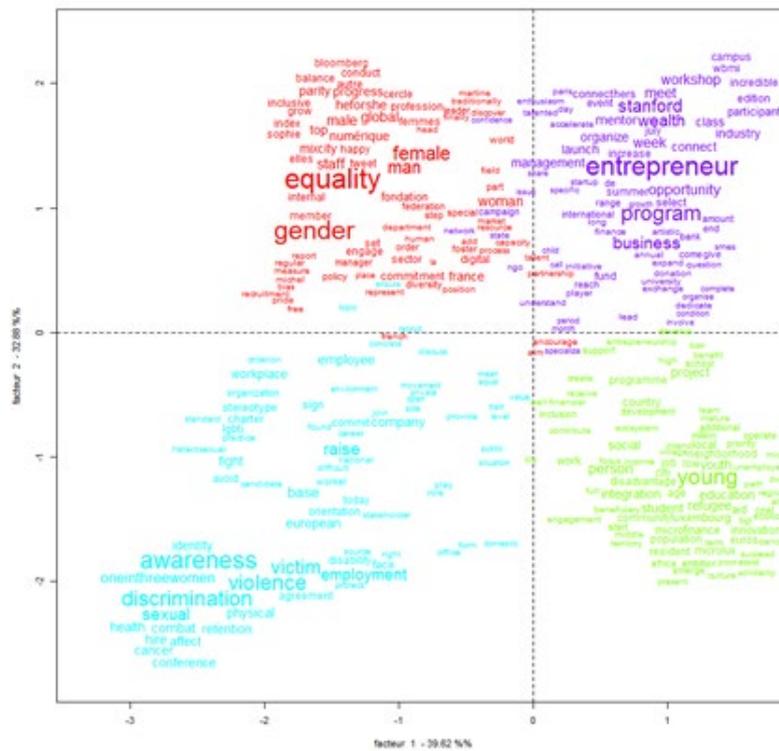


Figure 3. Creation of semantic clouds related to the components of ICC

Source: Author's calculation

Table 3. Categories revealed in the phase 3

| Category | Color code | Name | % of forms analyzed |
|------------|------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Category 1 | Red | Gender equality | 23.4 |
| Category 2 | Green | Youth Education | 37 |
| Category 3 | Turquoise | Awareness | 16.9 |
| Category 4 | Purple | Entrepreneurship | 22.7 |

Source: Author's calculation

Another representation of these categories is possible via IRaMuTeQ and that visually helps to better understand the links between the four categories of the cluster 4. In the Figure 4, it is possible to observe that the main community of words is the one in the green halo, whose center is the word “support” that gathers terms such as project, France, employee, programme, business. Three communities of words stem from this central one. The red halo gives us the information that this support is provided to young persons to promote social inclusion, education and commitment in different communities. The blue halo clearly indicates that women are supported by the Human Resources department as entrepreneurs, as female employees, and some partnerships, such as “HeForShe” (a United Nations initiative launched in 2014) are created to attain this goal. “Women Initiative foundation” is at the heart of the initiative taken to tackle this problem and appears as a topic linked to the one of woman (purple halo). Finally, the yellow halo is a group of words gravitating around the topic of diversity or inclusion, and more precisely the promotion of diversity inclusion in the workplace. It was interesting to note the consistency of the policies of the studied firms regarding the implementation of these policies in all countries where they are present. For example, BNP Paribas indicates that “staff – especially management personnel – receive training on diversity and inclusion that help them tackle stereotyping issues [in all countries where the group is present]”.

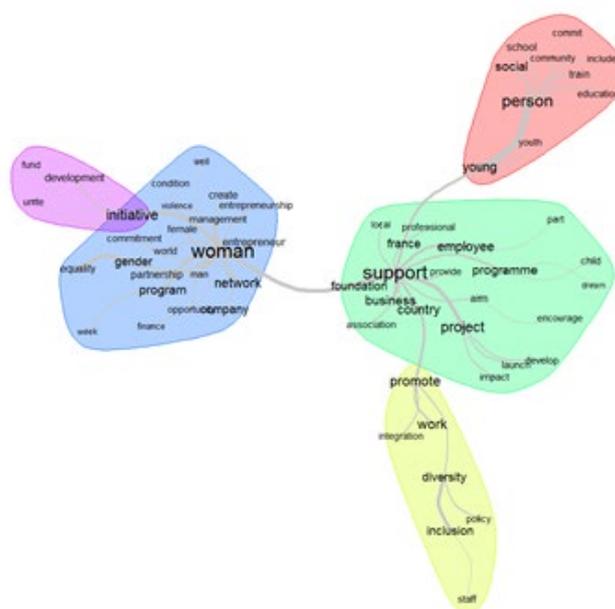


Figure 4. Similarities analysis of the cluster diversity

Source: Author's calculation

To sum up the obtained results, the study was referred to the work of Gudykunst (2004), as the objective is to identify the elements of the ICC that the companies use in their communication to create value. Therefore, the following excerpts of the communications on their websites allow us to understand what elements of ICC are used the most, in a decreasing order:

1. knowledge of how to gather information; knowledge of group differences
 “The objective is to create and experiment measures to fight violence against women in order to effectively support victims amongst their employees, in cooperation with specialized organizations. Concrete actions will be implemented such as online and face-to-face trainings to better understand domestic violence and its impact on work, sensitization kits bound for companies (posters, useful numbers, recommendations, etc.), mobilization events, etc.”; “What can banks do to promote youth integration? Operating in every corner of the country, banking groups work closely with local populations. This gives them a unique position to observe the barriers to integration facing young people, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods in cities and rural areas”;
2. ability to empathize
 “The bank also has policies in place to promote the hiring, retention and full workplace integration of employees with disabilities, providing training, raising awareness among employees across the group, and increasingly making use of service providers from the Protected Workers sector”.
3. motivation (mainly the absence of the need for predictability)
 “Within the framework of the Youth Peacemaker Network, WPDI’s flagship program that will be deployed in the Flats area of Cape Town, 360 young leaders will receive trainings in new technologies, conflict resolution and business management, as well as the necessary resources to enable them to carry out their projects with every chance of success.”

Therefore, as showed in the Figure 4, the development of the ICC on the organizational level of the studied companies has its source in the knowledge (category Support) supported by the ability to empathize or to understand (mainly youth and women in disadvantaged position) and the motivation to meet the Other and integrate him/her in company’s reality. Thus, ICC is a process

of learning that requires, according to the results of our study, the knowledge that enables (“gives the ability to”) the employees of these companies to encounter the “unknown” (the need for predictability being almost absent from the corpus). As indicated in the analyzed texts, companies manage to put it in practice by raising awareness among their employees, i.e. by enabling them to follow trainings and programs that aim at acquiring this knowledge to face the diversity. ICC is therefore a competence acquired and/or reinforced by trainings and continuous learning and is considered as company’s means to efficiently face the diversity in all the countries where the company is present.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research paper aims to contribute to the discussion about the disclosure of ICC in the corporate news of companies and thus further the understanding of the acquisition of ICC on the organizational level and its importance in addressing the diversity internationally. In that case, the research presents what companies of the financial services industry publish and how much they pay attention on the topic of ICC and its components.

In view of unifying the vast corporate news, the study identified four main homogenous clusters using a lexical content analysis. The findings of the lexical content analysis of 4,424 separate news (texts), 243,146 different words by 4 companies from French CAC 40 listed companies show that ICC is necessary to efficiently address: gender equality among employees and their equal progress within a company; education and training of young, talented and skillful people; awareness of differences that exist within an organizational culture; and finally entrepreneurship that is accessible to both men and women. More precisely, the results show that service companies do communicate about their practices regarding the acquisition and mobilization of the ICC. However, a low percentage of the news deals with this topic. As a matter of fact, 50.8% of the corpus (categories Work and Integration) covered elements potentially related to the ICC. The phase 2 allowed us to excerpt from these 50.8% a sub-corpus that, this time, dealt specifically with the topic of diversity in 20.9% of the sub-corpus. This eventually means that only about 10% of the corpus concentrates on the topic of diversity, for which the ICC is necessary.

The research gives a general message that since the most intellectual capital and high technology companies employ high-skilled workers, they develop very successful internal and external social networks that can further have greater performance than other competitive companies, and consequently have higher economic growth.

With respect to the literature on the ICC, the results confirm that companies do not communicate much on their intercultural practices. This can be explained as a desire to keep their competitive advantage and avoid losing talents (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2009). Moreover, the results show that ICC can be understood at the organizational level as a process of intercultural learning (Bennett 2004; Waxin & Barmeyer, 2008) that these companies ensure through trainings, partnerships and programs with universities, United Nations, etc.

The recommendations for further research concern the interdisciplinary approach that would allow for a clear image of how financial investment in human capital and, more specifically, in ICC, contribute company’s efficiency in addressing the diversity.

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