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Recommended Citation

Berbyuk Lindström, Nataliya and Noor, Javierya, "Intercultural Communication in Software Engineering Workplace A Case Study of Migrant Engineers in Sweden" (2021). *ICIS 2021 TREOs*. 36.

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Intercultural Communication in Software Engineering Workplace

A Case Study of Migrant Engineers in Sweden

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We would like to share a small case study, which we plan to develop into a research project, and we invite collaborators to join us.

Globally, software engineering (SE) organizations are becoming increasingly multicultural. Though the Swedish SE field is dominated by engineers educated outside Europe, little attention has been paid to their workplace integration. Our case study explores the experiences of migrant software engineers, addressing the following questions: 1) What challenges do they experience with workplace integration? 2) How do they mitigate these challenges? Our data includes 15 semi-structured interviews with software engineers from India and Pakistan, analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis. Our findings show that the engineers experience challenges primarily stemming from a combination of language problems and cultural differences. Though English is widely adopted as a corporate language, limited Swedish language skills create a “migrant-local gap,” hampering development of informal relationships. Poor Swedish language skills also prevent migrants from taking part in workplace activities, leading to power inequalities. Feelings of exclusion due to language problems are additionally strengthened by cultural differences. The Swedes being cautious in making friends with their colleagues (migrants or not) stems from such cultural traits as work-private life balance, differences in the perceptions on assertiveness and hierarchy (Hofstede et al. 2005). Further, the Agile way of working, which presupposes team empowerment, contributes to uncertainty concerning the role of management in decision making for our respondents, used to a more hierarchical, top-down leadership style from their home countries (Mayer, 2017). Migrant engineers report learning Swedish cultural norms from other migrants at work and managing language problems primarily by using Google translate. Though machine translation tools provide a non-judgmental, self-directed language support, in many cases they don't match human translations, especially for professional terminology (Rodríguez-Castro et al. 2018), resulting in understanding problems for our respondents.

Supporting migrants is essential if SE workplaces want to retain skilled professionals and create a productive multicultural working environment. Our project aims to contribute to knowledge accumulation in regard to profession-oriented learning in SE context. In particular, our research will provide insights in regard to professional inclusion, and the role of digital technology as a bridging tool between migrants and locals in SE workplace.

Hofstede, G. H., Hofstede, G. J., and Minkov, M. 2005. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (2 ed.). New York: Mcgraw-Hill

Rodríguez-Castro, M., Salas, S., and Benson, T. 2018. "To Google Translate™ or Not? Newcomer Latino Communities in the Middle," *Middle School Journal* (49:2), pp. 3-9.

Meyer, E. (2017). *Mayer_To Lead Across Cultures, Focus on Hierarchy and Decision Making*. Cross cultural management. *Harward Business Review*, July-August 2017, pp. 70-77