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Diversity management and migrant workers in Lombardy organizations: a promising – and challenging – picture from the field

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Diversity Management (DM) and the DM discourse in Italy

- ❑ **DM: an inclusive approach to human resource management** in organizations aimed at facilitating the **expression of personnel's different experiences and identities** and of **valorizing** this potential to **improve organizational performance**
- ❑ Two relevant **criticalities** in the **Italian situation** (debate + practice):
 - ➔ the **persistent gap** between the **exposed rhetoric** of DM and the **reality** of its application
 - ➔ the need for a perspective more sensitive to the **distinctive institutional traits** of the Italian context



The neglected and now urgent issue of cross-culture DM

- ❖ **Cross-culture DM:** a focus on organizational practices oriented to the management – recognition, integration, **valorization** – of **cultural differences related to national origin and ethnicity** in the personnel composition
- ❖ Up to now cross-culture DM as predominantly the domain of “**strategic international human resource management**” explored and applied in **multinational corporations’ networks (for key managers & professionals)**
- ❖ **Going beyond the SIHRM/MNCs paradigm:**
 - ➔ far more attention to be devoted to Italian organizations employing **foreign workers from Third Countries subject to a strong migratory pressure**
 - ➔ the stimulus provided by some **encouraging results stemming from the limited research on DM practices addressed to immigrant workers** in the Italian experience



The contribution of the UE-funded Project DIVERSE - 1

- ◆ In the context of the Italian part of the international and multi-level Project DIVERSE, **a field research on organizational practices of cross-culture DM** has been conducted in the Lombardy region (between March and October 2014)
 - ➔ as in each of all the 10 EU countries involved, **10 organizational case histories carried out at a specific territory level**

- ◆ The study is connected to **one of the main project's aims:**
 - ➔ to enhance awareness about **the advantages** – for organizations, immigrants and communities – entailed by **DM actions addressed to TCN workers**

- ◆ ...and, ultimately, to **one of the project's underlying assumptions:**
 - ➔ the idea of a necessary reorientation of the approach to immigrant work in accordance with **a real “human capital” perspective**



The contribution of the UE-funded Project DIVERSE - 2

Two basic guidelines in carrying out the study (shared by all project partners)

- 1. Criteria for the selection of the organizations**, which had to
 - ✓ be operating in the profit, non-profit or public sector
 - ✓ be located in the local area identified for each country involved (in Italy, Lombardy)
 - ✓ employ foreign personnel with a migratory background
 - ✓ have developed inclusive practices addressed to TCN personnel (and, if possible, also with regard to other categories of difference)
- 1. Use of a qualitative methodological approach:**
 - ✓ a **variety of data sources** (documentary materials and semi-structured interviews) for an in-depth analysis of the specific organizational reality observed
 - ✓ a **check list for fieldwork and interpretation** related to 7 thematic areas
 - ➔ organizational profile, demography, culture and climate, human resource management practices, perceptions of socio-cultural diversity at work, DM actions (especially addressed to TCNs), impacts of cross-culture DM practices



Two starting points for the Italian research on DM practices

- ❑ A clear awareness that **the Italian case poses problems** for the attempt to place stress on **the strategic reasons at the heart of DM** canonical models of Anglo-Saxon origin:
 - ➔ **high concentration – i.e., tendential segregation – of immigrants** in certain sectors and occupational areas (e.g.: construction, catering, healthcare and home care services) and in the low-mid levels of the organizational hierarchies, often with a considerable degree of over-qualification

- ❑ **Nonetheless, the intent to obtain insights** on the incidence (or feasibility) of certain aspects emphasized by international research:
 - ➔ the consistency of actions aimed at facilitating the job placement, integration with colleagues, life quality and professional development of TCN workers
 - ➔ the capability of cross-cultural DM to concur to the organization's goals and the improvement of its performance



The final set of selected organizations

Organization	Type of organization	Sector of activity	Personnel (TCNs)
Autogrill	Profit	Food and beverage, travel retail and duty free	4,857 (491)
Cooperativa Viadana Facchini	Profit	Warehouse and handling services	390 (355)
FBC Bonfanti & Bisteel	Profit	Metalworking (metal carpentry)	22 (6)
BonBoard	Profit	Business recruiting and consultancy	3 (2)
Biocatering	Profit	Catering and distribution of organic food products	5 (5)
Yalla.it	Non-profit	Communication (internet blogging)	49 (48)
Cooperativa sociale “La Rete”	Non-profit	Social and health services (mental health and social exclusion)	81 (7)
Fondazione “Don Carlo Gnocchi”	Non-profit	Social and health services (rehabilitative, socio-assistential, socio-educational services)	2.035 (189)
CGIL – Camera del Lavoro di Brescia	(Non-profit)	Trade union representation, social and assistance services	110 (7)
Azienda di Servizi alla Persona “Golgi-Redaelli”	Public	Health care	1,274 (64)
NRDC – ITA (Nato Rapid Deployable Corps, Italy)	Public (supra-national)	Military	2,000 (-)



The emerging picture

- ❖ In these organizations **cross-culture DM** has emerged chiefly as something that “is done” informally and that is closely related to **their “natural” evolution** and ongoing experiences, rather than as a system of planned interventions
- ❖ A key influence is played by **self-propulsive factors** primarily connected to the development of a **distinctive organizational culture**; an important role is also played by factors related to **outside social dynamics** (e.g.: an increased possibility of finding the required formal qualifications within the immigrant labour supply)
- ❖ Three general **underlying patterns** (which may also tend to intermingle):
 - ➔ attention to ethno-national diversity as **an implicit premise of collective action**, i.e. something entailed by the organization’s value system
 - ➔ practices addressed to foreigners as **a mode or means of action** for dealing more effectively with a set of internal and/or external challenges
 - ➔ cross-cultural diversity **in itself as a goal** towards which organizational conducts and strategies are aimed (e.g.: within a mission emphasizing civic/cultural objectives or pursuing innovative services/solutions)



A variety of practices - 1

- ⦿ **Forms of practical support aimed at assisting foreign workers in tackling a number of basic needs** (e.g., long leave periods, family reunion, financial and health needs)
 - ➔ although “elementary” and usually implemented on a case-by-case basis, these promote individual conditions of serenity and productivity at work and somehow imply a redefinition of the organization’s commitment toward its persons
- ⦿ **Solutions and changes in the area of HRM** (e.g.: recruitment and insertion practices; formal agreements for guaranteeing specific cultural rights; advancement opportunities, through continuing training, for people in low-level job positions; the ensuring of forms of flexibility in working hours)



A variety of practices - 2

- ⦿ **The socio-cultural development of inclusion-oriented work environments** (e.g.: formal channels like codes of conducts and mission statements with a more or less explicit reference to diversity-related issues and goals; the utilization of multi-ethnic or multinational work teams; regular meetings in units as occasions of both dialogue and conflict management; positive organizational climates based on direct communication and collaborative leadership styles)
- ⦿ **The explicit pursuit of organizational performance goals by means of cultural pluralism in personnel** (e.g.: through the placement of foreign personnel in important positions or, *tout court*, by using the staff multicultural composition as a key resource for “getting the business done”)



A variety of impacts

A number of “virtuous” effects related to the presence, and especially the (formal or informal) management, of immigrant workers

★ **To the advantage of foreign workers**

➔ benefits regarding work placement, the availability of tools for handling problems related to their migrant condition (and for improving the quality of their family life), the chance to see their contributions and skills recognized and thus opportunities for professional development and/or career advancement

★ **To the advantage of the organization**

➔ performance benefits (though not always explicitly sought) with respect to personnel motivation and retention, adaptation to multicultural clients/users and market expansion, the ability to find solutions to specific operational problems

★ **[Likely] To the advantage of the surrounding social context**

➔ the empowerment of immigrant workers as a primary vehicle for processes of social integration and the development of a local community’s human capital
➔ a function of cultural dissemination and education (when diversity is incorporated in the organizational mission)



Three underlying facilitating mechanisms

To varying degrees and often in non-explicit ways, **three distinctive mechanisms seem to underpin and facilitate** these organizations' DM practices

① **Internal (ethical) cultures as self-propulsive factors**

- shared conceptions and values, institutionalized through the unfolding of the organizational history, revolving around socially oriented principles of inclusiveness
- the presence of a propensity toward experimentation and innovation as enabling openness to situations and opportunities involving diversity

② **Opening-up to – and incorporation of – the context**

- a tendency to bring the experiences, needs, and competences of context stakeholders “directly into” processes for the creation of services
- networking favored by hybrid and flexible organizational forms and ICT
- a process of mutual strengthening between dealing with stakeholder diversity and the internal practice of diversity

③ **Citizenship processes within the organization**

- formal and (especially) informal processes of involvement and participation of personnel in the tasks and priorities pursued by the organization
- while immigrant employee engagement generates specific “symbolic” benefits, this mobilizes key intangible assets for the organization's performance



- ◆ **The organization's activity sector as an important “situational” factor** permitting involvement in activities to play a pivotal role as a rewarding and valorizing mechanism for TCNs
 - typically, through the opportunity of having direct and continuous relationships with clients/users

- ◆ **An idea worth delving into: non-profit organization as having a set of resources**, for the internal and external valorization of ethno-national diversity (and of other differences), which is **naturally “inscribed”** into their forms, objectives and cultures, and hence in their ordinary work practices

- ◆ **The institutional dimension** represented by the influence of public actors and regulations as both
 - **a limiting factor**, by preventing the valorization of skills that are not formally recognized
 - **an enabling factor**, by permitting (through credentialization) access not only to job positions but also to professional opportunities in the management of activities



Some noteworthy conclusions

- The presence of **practices of inclusion/valorization of TCN employees** capable of **generating value** not only for **foreign personnel** (e.g.: work integration, quality of life and even professional opportunities), but also for **organizations** (e.g.: development of commitment, resources for managing relationships with heterogeneous stakeholders) and, likely, for social contexts
- The presence of **constraints** (e.g.: budget cuts, internal perception of “reverse discrimination”, clients’ reaction) and **facilitating factors** (e.g.: sectors of activity, internal ethical cultures) in the implementation of cross-culture DM
- An array of **relational, and prevalently informal, mechanisms of organizational life** as an essential driver for the consolidation of DM practices
 - a pivotal role is played by the development of socially oriented value systems
 - sometimes this combine fruitfully with the adoption of more structured and targeted DM interventions (albeit at an embryonic or experimental stage)
- The support to the conviction that **an hypothetical “Italian way” to (cross-cultural) DM** could be based on the **singular intertwining** of a set of emerging socio-cultural dynamics and some deliberate and formalized strategies



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