

# THE BENEFITS OF Cultural Diversity & Cultural Awareness



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Diversity has become the norm in most European societies and in the social and health care system, both employees and users of the services are culturally very complex. Communication between employees working in the social and health-care sector and their clients with a migration background is greatly influenced by the ability to deal with cultural diversity. Differences in attitude and approaches to clients with different ethnic backgrounds often give rise to misunderstandings and irritation, sometimes even leading to dissociation and isolation of specific groups of staff and groups of clients/patients.

Consequently, in pluralist societies, no social service benefit or action can ignore issues of cultural interaction as an intrinsic feature of notions of fairness and equality. In this publication we want to show you that cultural diversity is not only a challenge but also a benefit for your clients, your staff, and your organization and that intercultural competences are a must in a modern organization.





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## THE BENEFITS FOR YOUR CLIENTS

Benefits of delivering culturally appropriate service. There are many benefits for clients of healthcare or social care organizations that provide a culturally appropriate experience to everyone who uses its service, regardless of their cultural background. Having an organization that has staff who are culturally aware and have developed cultural competence helps to increase mutual respect for all. Those involved in delivering the service and those receiving it.

Clients will trust the assistant and work together toward prevention of illness. Clients who experience sensitivity, compassion and understanding and feel an acceptance of their cultural identity will be able to discuss their symptoms and therefore their needs in an atmosphere of trust making any culturally sensitive solution offered acceptable and workable for the client.

Moreover, intercultural competences can help in reaching the correct diagnosis efficiently, as they can assist the employees to distinguish between the symptoms and the cultural differences in expressing the symptoms. When patients feel that they have been heard and understood by their healthcare pro-

viders they are more likely to participate in preventative healthcare measures and less likely to miss appointments, resulting in better health outcomes.

In the care home, the residents feel better when their cultural needs are understood. A social care setting is a resident's home and therefore if their cultural needs are understood, respected and implemented then they will feel more relaxed and able to enjoy life resulting in enhanced wellbeing and less dependence on staff and the medical profession. In social care setting residents who have their cultural needs both understood and met are less likely to present with mental health problems, including depression, and consequently their physical health will be improved.

Organizations with a rich mix of cultures present in their workforce will be able to provide a better quality of care if they receive training to understand the implications of different cultural perspectives and will be able to use their skills and knowledge to provide a culturally appropriate service for clients.

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*“When taking into account the cultural diversity of our clients, the most important effect is that the families feel welcomed. Often it is a pre-requisite for them to come to us at all and they also tell others to come, when they know they are appreciated with their identity. This is the only way that they will get access to our services. Once they have gained trust, they also help out each other and small (communication) networks can develop.”*

Dr. Jutta List-Ivankovic  
Leader of the family center Haerztor, Northeim Germany



*“When our residents are uneasy and restless, it often helps to play music to calm them down. We have a person from Iraq, who is very troubled. We tried to play some music for him but it did not help until we became aware that of course he was used to listening to another kind of music! One of my colleagues found some Arab music and that actually helped!”*

Linn Wittendorff  
Nurse, Specialized dementia care home DCA, Aarhus Denmark.

## CASE EXAMPLE

### A Family Center

The responsible body of the Family Centre is a regional children’s protection organization, an association that aims to improve the lives of children, their social situation and their health. The Family Centre provides a safe space for families to meet and play, but also to seek advice and help in difficult situations.

The Family Centre has explicitly extended its support to all kinds of families: big or small families, family members with disabilities, families from all kinds of cultural backgrounds etc. For migrant families who are not as familiar with the language it is often a big step to contact an “official” institution to seek help with any family difficulties they may be facing. Questions like “Is the development of my child adequate for his/her age?”, “How can I stay healthy during my pregnancy?” Or problems like “I am sometimes struggling or feel overburdened with caring for my children” are often difficult to talk about with a “stranger”. Making the families feel welcome with their individual backgrounds and family structure, is an essential step in creating the trust that is needed to discuss these kinds of issues. The wide ranging support offer and the “welcoming culture” (e.g. materials available in different languages, sensitive staff) are a prerequisite for the families to access services that improve their health. Often the Family Centre is a starting point for future planning, so that the families can also benefit from other health care services that they would not have had access to without this intermediation.



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## THE BENEFITS FOR YOUR STAFF

Intercultural competences increase confidence and reduce stress. Being interculturally competent in the context of health care and social work, means to have a certain attitude towards other cultures combined with knowledge of how to interact and communicate with people from another cultural context. This competence improves the self-reflection of professionals and – more important – makes them feel more secure and confident in dealing with the target group.

Intercultural competences diminish prejudices and help to increase the feeling of mutual trust and respect. They facilitate the communication between carers and patients, resulting in a more efficient work process. Cultural misunderstandings, which often cause stressful situations for the staff, can be avoided more easily.

Intercultural competences can be used for the staff as well. There is not only an increasingly multicultural client base – there is also, a growing cultural diversity among professionals in health care and social services. This should be seen as an important resource to support colleagues in situations with language barriers or assist with knowledge on

cultural specifics. Let your staff benefit from mutual cultural learning and show your staff that you value their intercultural expertise.

Intercultural competences promote effective and productive work. With intercultural competence as a lens for understanding intentions and behaviours, time will be spent more productively in facilitating opportunities for understanding important differences.

Intercultural competences increase job satisfaction by minimizing unpleasant situations for staff and patients arising from cultural misunderstandings.

The staff:

- Develop knowledge that supports them in their daily work with clients
- Encourage a working climate based on openness and mutual respect
- Increase participation and therefore, motivation
- Allows for personal development
- Increase patient and client satisfaction and reduce the cost of treatment

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*“It is especially important to know the particular cultural factors that may affect one’s clinical image because something that we may consider a symptom of psychopathology may not be in another culture.*

*...and in practice, knowledge of the cultural background, as well as any element that can differentiate each client, such as how you should treat them, is important if you have to touch them, what meaning different behaviors have, the importance of religion, elements that will help you understand things and how to handle them.”*

Psychologist, interviewee, Greek field research, March 2020

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“At the nursing home, where I work, I have colleagues from 11 different countries. We have residents from 9 different countries. It’s not easy but luckily, I can ask my colleagues, who have another ethnic background, for advice. I ask them all the time and in that way I learn something new every day - and I become more and more competent.”

Jannie Petersen, Social and Health Care Assistant, Nursing home “Toftegården” Aarhus, Denmark

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## CASE EXAMPLE

Intercultural circle – exchange of experiences in the staff team

To create a positive environment for mutual learning and exchange among the staff, a social organisation (active in care for elderly and disabled people) established a monthly “intercultural circle”. This intercultural circle is a mixture of meeting and team supervision. The aim behind this circle is to make efficient use of the diversity of staff members. The meetings give the professionals the chance to talk and to reflect on their experiences. Concrete challenges with clients/patients are discussed and solutions are developed, always with the focus on cultural aspects and how to consider them in their daily work. The intercultural circle is facilitated by a moderator, who encourages the participants to look at the problems from different perspectives. These cultural conversations encourage the staff to stay open minded and support them to act confidently in interactions with their clients. It also increases the motivation of diverse groups, to support the organisation’s mission and it creates a valuing atmosphere of appreciation.



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## THE BENEFITS FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

All over Europe we see a growth in the migrant population and cultural diversity, implying an increase in the number of users and providers of socio-health care services with a migrant background. Given this diversity in the work environment, cultural competence is becoming increasingly important. Learning how to communicate and collaborate in increasingly diverse teams and with increasingly diverse clients is critical in order to effectively break down the barriers to optimizing a company's efficiency and productivity in the social and healthcare sector.

Diversity of staff is acknowledged as a resource: knowledge of other languages and the cultural specifics of different target groups is helpful for the work of the organisation as a whole and allows a higher sensibility towards patients/clients and users in general with different cultural backgrounds, religions or traditions. Having multilingual and "culturally trained" staff could represent a saving in investment in training and development programmes, as some of the staff already speak more than one language and can communicate and interact effectively with people across cultures who have varying beliefs and cultures.

Improving cultural competence in the workplace can bring visible benefits to the organisation, such as improved productivity and performance, but takes time and a commitment to education. However, there are many good reasons to pursue this path:

- Efficient cooperation of teams: This can increase staff performance by enhancing teamwork and unity and reducing conflicts within the teams in the organisation.
- A positive reputation helps to attract new clients and increase the satisfaction of clients using the service. This comes from building trust with current clients and building relationships with new clients.
- Increased creativity in the organisation: Intercultural competences increase creativity in solving-problems, as different perspectives also lead to the development of new strategies for problem-solving.
- Improved communication within the organisation: good communication skills are a prerequisite for cultural competence. Everyone must be able to communicate their thoughts and ideas clearly and be willing to listen to others' opinions – be it those of their team members or of their clients or patients.
- Increased sensitivity and flexibility in job performance tend to make teams more productive and harmonious. As routine, management or strategic changes occur, these employees will be quicker and more willing to adapt.
- Better working environment and increased job satisfaction: Due to reduced conflict situations, job satisfaction increases and reduces the fluctuation in a field that often suffers from a shortage of skilled workers.

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*“With regard to my current job, the development of intercultural competences has a personal impact, while, with reference to the corporate reality, it does promote improved hospital and social care; bring about the decrease in situations leading to explicit conflicts between the organisation’s staff and users; improve the placement of foreign students in internships and offer more opportunities for exchange and personal growth, and not just professional growth.”*

D. Thiel, CEO, Göttingen, Germany  
Non-profit provider of facilities in the health, social and educational sector

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*“For me as the CEO it is important that we are able to take best care of people with different backgrounds. This is crucial for our clients but also for us – apart from being able to meet clients’ needs it is important in terms of funding/reimbursement of our services through external agencies etc., having a good reputation, getting new clients, being competitive. In a nutshell we have lot to lose if we do not take into account the diversity of our clients. Therefore, our staff must be trained accordingly - this includes intercultural training.”*

Silvia Scaffidi Domianello, Padua, Italy, public health company

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## CASE EXAMPLE

### Ambulatory for care and individual coaching

The organization offers ambulatory care for mentally ill people and those people at risk of mental illness as well as individual job coaching. Its aims are to support, train, treat and care for people who find themselves in difficult social or psychological situations or who want to start (a new) career.

The personal needs of the clients are in the foreground. They are helped individually and with a holistic approach. Culture also plays a role. In order to support people in a way that meets their needs, the situation must be considered on a very individual basis. Culture is one of many aspects. The success of the support is important – not only for the clients, but also for the organization. Cultural awareness and training are seen as a success factor in serving a diverse clientele and as a means of reducing stress and potential conflicts. The team benefits when services run as smoothly as possible - the work is already stressful.

The organization provides regular staff training and exchange on topics that relate to diversity and specific needs that stem from different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, the organization works with cultural mediators who help when needed, for example with language barriers that are difficult to overcome or in conflict situations. This way, the staff does not feel alone; they are professionally supported and can concentrate on their specific work. Problems are taken seriously and resolved as quickly as possible. This reduces stress and creates a good working atmosphere. Despite the lack of skilled workers in the social and health care sector, there have been no difficulties in finding appropriately qualified staff. In addition, staff fluctuation is comparatively low.



I-CARE addresses these cultural differences by providing people working in the social and healthcare sector with learning and training opportunities that aim to:

- promote communication and social skills in their interaction with clients with a migration background
- promote social and emotional learning
- acquire social and personal skills that are essential to their practice
- achieve social understanding and active, confident social participation
- achieve social cohesion and community involvement
- develop a sense of social responsibility
- support social diversity
- reduce prejudices and xenophobia

[www.i-care-project.net](http://www.i-care-project.net)

We have developed a modular blended learning programme to develop cultural awareness and competency of your staff. It is designed to explore intercultural attitudes in Health and Social Care settings and to build intercultural competences to ensure that everyone is able to provide the highest standards of care in diverse settings.

To find out more and gain free access to these resources visit the I-CARE Toolbox:

**[www.i-care-project.net/toolbox](http://www.i-care-project.net/toolbox)**

or email Apricot Training Management Ltd at :

[info@apricot-ltd.co.uk](mailto:info@apricot-ltd.co.uk)

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