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TAILORING FOREIGN HRM PRACTICES: A CASE-STUDY OF SOFT-SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WITH INTER-COUNTRY VARIABILITY

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Abstract. This study investigates the implementation of inter-country variability (ICV) in shaping human resource management (HRM) practices, specifically focusing on soft skills development within a legal entity in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Based on a thorough literature review, the research highlights the practical use of these inter-country differences and the importance of customized approaches in developing economies. The study involved a two-month case-study analysis with 30 participants. The Bochum Inventory of Personality and Competences (BIP) questionnaire and ICV-specific training techniques, including role-playing, case studies, presentations, and Design Jams, were used. The results showed significant improvement in participants' soft skills, particularly in social competencies, indicating the effectiveness of the ICV-based program. The study tested and confirmed two hypotheses: that ICV may influence organization-specific incentives for soft skills development and that incorporating ICV-based differences enhances the acceptance of foreign HRM practices. The study's methodology was validated using Cronbach's Alpha and statistical t-tests ($p < 0.05$). Participants expressed a strong willingness to continue their involvement, suggesting the potential for ongoing positive impact. This research not only contributes to the understanding of HRM practices but also provides a valuable methodology for future works on utilizing ICV in foreign HRM implementation in diverse organizational settings.

Key words: inter-country variability, soft skills, legal entity, HRM practices, Bochum Inventory of Personality and Competences.

Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of developing nations like Kazakhstan, leveraging international expertise to optimize the operational efficiency of local entities has become a prevalent strategy. This paper seeks to broaden the conventional approach of adapting foreign practices by introducing the concept of inter-country variation (ICV). With a focused case study on the human resource management (HRM) strategies employed by a legal entity in Almaty city, this study aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of implementing foreign HRM practices within a unique context, hoping to achieve a practical balance between generalization and over-specification in the methodology.

Built upon a robust literature foundation, the analysis delves into the intricacies of investigating foreign experiences and identifies pivotal soft skills crucial for success. The utilization of the

Bochum Inventory of Personality and Competences (BIP) based questionnaire and interviews serves to assess the soft skills level and ICV-specific factors, respectively. The results of the studies were used to test the following hypothesis:

H_1 : Inter-country variability in the chosen organization may define unconventional, organization-specific incentives for the development of soft skills.

H_2 : Implementing ICV-based peculiarities into the soft-skill development practice will increase the acceptance rate of foreign HRM practices.

Obtained results were validated with Cronbach's Alpha and the statistical test, revealing significant correlations between ICV values and team building, social confidence, and other relevant soft skills. Beyond shedding light on HRM practices in Almaty, this study carries broader implications for the implementation of foreign practices in rapidly developing countries.

Literature review

The literature review first underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of HRM methodology, drawing on studies highlighting variations in HR practices across different countries and introducing the concept of Inter-country Variation (ICV). The second section emphasizes the critical role of soft skills in successful labor market performance, particularly in emerging market economies, while noting potential biases and risks associated with the perceived innate nature of these skills.

While using foreign experience is still common in developing countries, the precise methodology for the field of consideration – thus, HRM – should be learned in greater detail before moving on to the actual case analysis in order to ensure a grasp of specific principles, tailored to the context at hand that not only enhance the effectiveness of the study but also contribute to the development of strategies and solutions that align seamlessly with the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the local environment. In essence, exploration of HRM methodologies lays the foundation for informed decision-making and successful implementation, fostering sustainable growth and positive outcomes within the evolving landscape of developing economies and allowing to broaden the implications of this paper for future studies.

Starting from the early 2000s, research work that was published by Soheli A. and Schroeder R.G. revealed the existence of differences in HR practices in enterprises operating in different countries, confirming hypotheses previously presented in the literature using an analysis of seven HRM practices in countries such as Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States. The results of this study show that there are differences in HR practices among businesses operating in different countries, however, most of the practices used in different sectors remain similar within countries. More recent research in this area, has complemented previous discoveries regarding the importance of studying and applying foreign HRM practices, but also expanded this concept by introducing a factor of inter-country variation. ICV implies that instead of comparing and generalizing analysis to an entire country, more attention should be paid to individual and regional differences in personnel and mentality. At the time of publication, the study statistically confirmed that addressing the concepts of happiness, the importance of free time and freedom of choice increases the success of implementing HRM practices by 2-4%,

whereas overall understanding of the ICV accounts for the 85% of the work values variation. The authors note that although the index of increasing practical significance is not so high, this area, which is not focused on generally accepted socio-demographic parameters such as age and gender, has enormous potential for the development of HRM and can be used for better implementation of foreign practices. The concepts are highly relevant for this work since Kazakhstan is a multinational country with a large territory, different climatic conditions, and cultural preferences, and the listed factors may contain valuable information that will allow better adaptation of foreign HRM practices to the selected legal entity in the city of Almaty.

Based on the first section of the literature review, it is possible to derive the following conclusions that are important for the consecutive explorations of foreign studies:

- HRM techniques change between countries, demonstrating the significance of evaluating foreign experience rather than just one country to gain a more comprehensive picture of modern HR practices around the world.
- HRM practices used within a single country but in different industries have more similarities than differences, allowing us to consider foreign experience without focusing solely on the legal industry (the direction of the chosen enterprise) and instead focusing on identifying fundamental features within that country.
- HRM practices that will be selected as relevant may be more promising if developed based on the cultural and social characteristics of Almaty city employees, in other words, with the consideration of ICV.

Based on the conclusions revealed, the second section of the literature review was dedicated to identifying relevant HRM practices from abroad. In 2023, a comprehensive study was conducted in Thailand to reveal the most valuable job skill sets predicting success during the selection phase. The work was based on the collection of empirical data through interviews but additionally included the analysis of historical data and observations from HR workers. The authors of the study generalize the results to countries with developing economies, calling them emerging market economies (EMEs), which made the results applicable to this paper. According to their conclusion, the most important thing for employees is soft skills, which play a key role in the success of workers in the labor market. Similar studies conducted in France were aimed

at analyzing the importance of using soft skills in personnel management based on the collected empirical data from 46 interviews. It was revealed that in addition to the basic core ability of effective communication, soft skills include a variety of qualities that go beyond simply conveying information. They provide the ability to inspire, engage in social interactions, and empathize with clients. Often, employers believe that these skills are innate and cannot be developed through training. This position may be a strategy for avoiding the cost of developing staff skills by shifting responsibility to external factors such as educational institutions or families. However, it is worth noting that the idea of the innate nature of soft skills is not definitive. Research, especially in the field of psychology, indicates that these skills can be developed through training, socialization and other external factors.

Developing soft skills is critical, as studies consistently show that hard technical skills contribute only 15% to workplace success, with the remaining 85% relying on communication, creativity, and managerial attributes. Despite this, current HRM lacks effective mechanisms for identifying and cultivating these crucial characteristics. While some studies rank skills in recruitment, interviewing, and surveying, there is still a gap in tailored methodological approaches. Additionally, developing personal skills demands conscious effort and energy, often necessitating a conducive environment. This paper aims to bridge the literature gap by proposing a method to integrate ICV into HRM practices. The approach seeks a balance, preventing excessive adaptation of the program to individual organizations for the sake of reproducibility while avoiding overgeneralization to the entire country, thereby fostering a more nurturing environment.

Methodology

The case-study analysis took place in the legal entity “Pravozashchita”, located in Almaty city of Kazakhstan. It is a Limited Liability Partnership established in 2015 with the workforce of 50-100 people. The primary goal of organization is to provide comprehensive and highly qualified legal services to a wide range of clients, including both legal entities and individuals. The agency’s comprehensive range of services includes representation in judicial bodies, debt recovery, extending assistance to banks in debt

collection and locating debtors, as well as active participation in enforcement proceedings – an area of specialization that distinguishes them among its peers. The organization maintains a moderately balanced gender representation across all secondary levels and departments, emphasizing diversity and inclusion, with leadership positions showing a preference towards male candidates. It offers structured career paths with opportunities for specialization and advancement to leadership positions. Regular training programs are conducted to keep employees abreast of the latest legal technologies and industry trends. The organization actively participates in diversity and inclusion programs, including mentorship initiatives and affinity groups. Employees enjoy a comprehensive benefits package, encompassing medical insurance, flexible work arrangements, and additional resources for professional development. Performance evaluations are based on legal expertise, client satisfaction, and contributions to the organization’s strategic goals. “Pravozaschita” maintains regular feedback mechanisms, all-staff meetings, and employee surveys to foster a positive corporate culture.

A total of 30 people from legal, finance, and administration departments have participated in the study for the period of 2 months. At the beginning of the study, participants were provided with the Bochum Inventory of Personality and Competences questionnaire-based self-assessment aimed at the measurement of 14 traits in the following four domains: occupational orientation, social competencies, occupational behavior, and psychological constitution. The scale included 5 points from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”.

The survey was administered offline to ensure engagement and followed with an open-session interview aimed at identifying the possible variations on the cultural variations and whether the ICV factors derived in previous studies were shown to be valuable. The methods for the development of the soft skills were chosen based on the collected existing approaches and allowed to reveal the following common techniques: role-playing, case-study, and presentations along with more innovative Hackathons inspired approach of Design Jams which is focused on the development of 4Cs – critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication – in the playful interdisciplinary working on the global problems in the small groups (Figure 1).

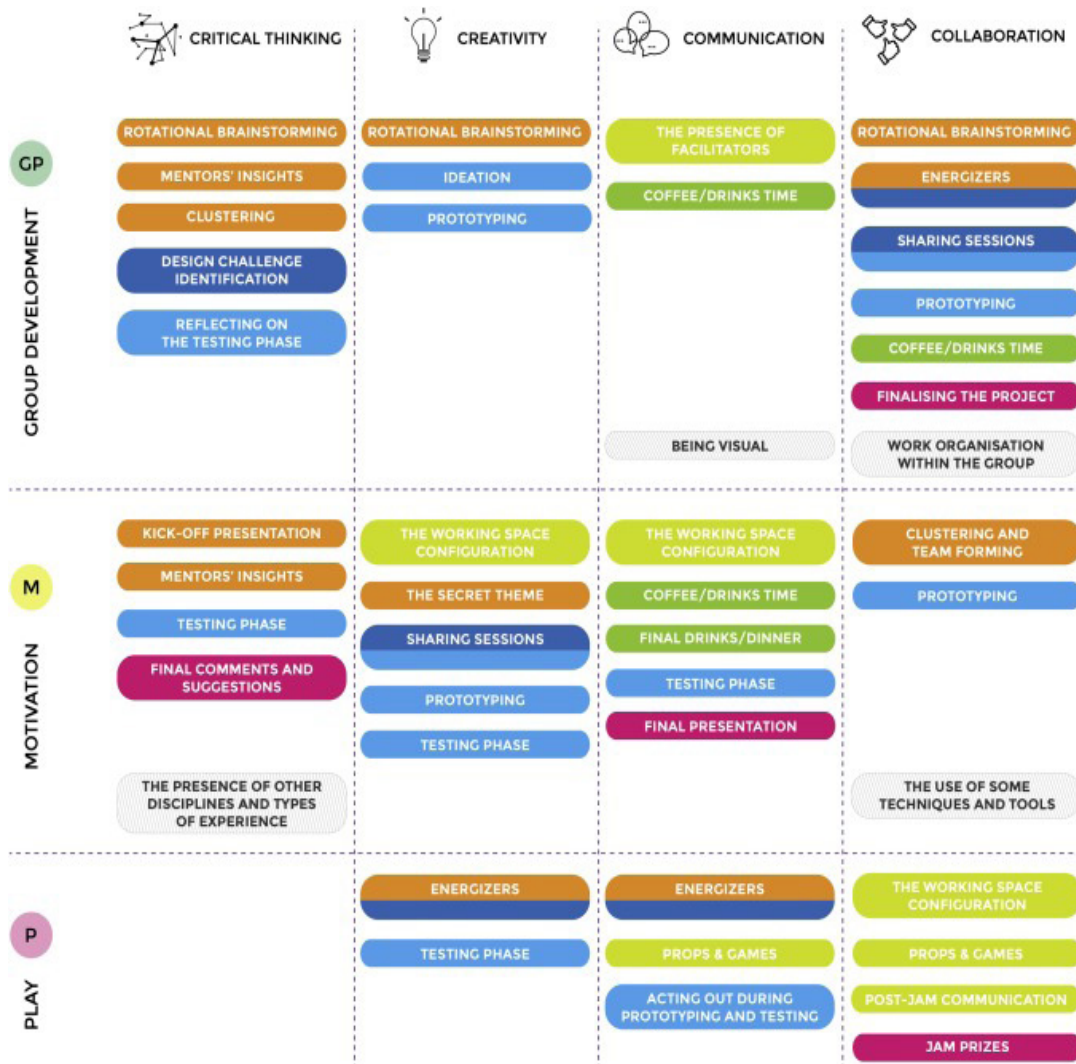


Figure 1 – The Design Jams’ overview

By the end of 2 months period the BIP self-assessment questionnaire was conducted along with the 9 additional questions in the same scale: 4 of them asking to rate the effectiveness of each of the conducted sessions, 4 questions asking which skills domain out of four they think was targeted the most at each of the sessions type, 1 question defining their likeliness to continue with this type of sessions in the future. Additionally, an open-ended question for the additional comments was provided in the end. In the post-implementation evaluation, participants received detailed description of the 4 domains to ensure better self-assessment and understanding.

The questionnaire responses were tested for the Cronbach’s values to identify the consistency of responses and overall results validity. The 28 BIP questions were compared pre and post sessions by

averaging the scores of participants across 4 domains and testing the mean changes for significance using the t-test and with the assumption that the null hypothesis is that means are equal. The normalization of the scores from the “Strongly Agree | Strongly Disagree” metric was done by the corresponding conversion to “5 | 0”.

Results and Discussion

Information from open-session interviews reinforced previously identified values such as free time, leisure activities, and happiness as key motivators for workers. Additional factors, rooted in shared experiences within the Almaty region, including traffic congestion, a proclivity for hiking, interest in outdoor activities, concern about air pollution, and seismic events, were also noted. Based

on this information it was possible to create a pilot version of the ICV-adopted soft-skills development plan, illustrated on the Figure 2. Overall, trainings took place on a weekly basis with each type of a training taking place twice in the specified time frame. It is possible to observe how the flexible

implementation of ICV-factors complemented sessions by providing a suitable environment (e.g., outdoor activities), serving as a motivational element (e.g., days off), and fostering connections among employees from diverse specialties (e.g., addressing city traffic issues).

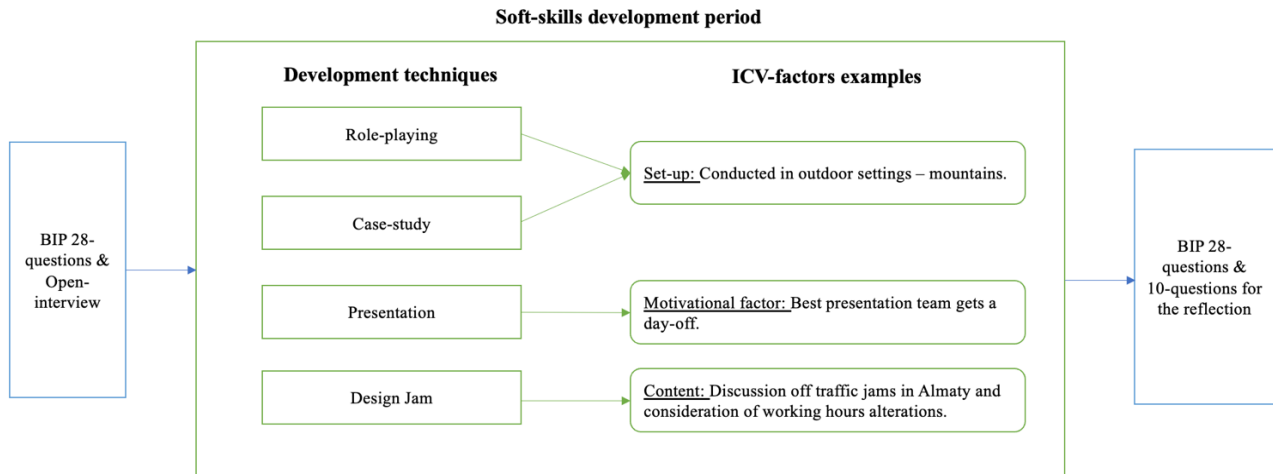


Figure 2 – Example of the inter-country variation based soft-skills development plan.

Based on the factors derived from the interview, it is possible to substantiate the hypothesis formulated at the outset of the study (H_1), asserting that inter-country variability in the chosen organization may define unconventional, organization-specific incentives for the development of soft skills as it was shown on the example of Almaty city-based entity.

When it comes to the quantitative data, the obtained information from the 28-question based BIP questionnaire, it was revealed that overall performance of the participants in terms of soft skills was average for categories such as occupational orientation and occupational behavior, and below average for social competencies and psychological constitution (Table 1). After 2 months period of the ICV-based program, the observed changes in soft skills among participants were substantial, indicating the effectiveness of the implemented training. Notably, the most progress was observed in the social competencies as the average score doubled with social sensitivity along with the team orientation being the most responsible for such dramatic alterations. The lowest amends

were witnessed in the occupational behavior and occupational orientation which both started at the average score and by the end shifted to the most positive value of the same constrain. The difference of the mean values was tested for significance using t-test with the p-value below 0.05. All variables proved to reject the null hypothesis. The statistical reliability of the study was demonstrated through Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.79 and 0.90, indicating high internal consistency and reliability in capturing participants' responses. This underscored the effectiveness of the questionnaire and assessment methods in accurately measuring the intended constructs.

A more in-depth understanding of the program's effectiveness was obtained through the analysis of the post-implementation questions. In terms of program satisfaction, participants conveyed a notable level of contentment, as evidenced by an average score of 4 out of 5 for the likelihood of continuing the program. This positive "Agree" response reflects a favorable attitude towards sustained engagement in the ICV-tailored soft skills development initiative.

Table 1 – Comparative evaluation of soft skills (n=30)

Soft skills	Pre-Implementation Evaluation (0-5)	Post-Implementation Evaluation (0-5)	Significance level
Occupational orientation	2.76	3.22	p < 0.05
Achievement motivation	1.72	2.18	p < 0.05
Power motivation	4.23	4.69	p < 0.05
Leadership motivation	2.33	2.79	p < 0.05
Social competencies	1.98	4.01	p < 0.05
Social sensitivity	0.11	3.40	p < 0.05
Openness to contact	2.61	3.98	p < 0.05
Sociability	3.09	4.41	p < 0.05
Team orientation	0.72	3.75	p < 0.05
Assertiveness	3.37	4.51	p < 0.05
Occupational behavior	2.65	3.10	p < 0.05
Conscientiousness	1.61	2.06	p < 0.05
Flexibility	2.22	2.67	p < 0.05
Action orientation	4.12	4.57	p < 0.05
Psychological constitution	2.10	2.93	p < 0.05
Emotional stability	1.06	1.89	p < 0.05
Working under pressure	1.67	2.50	p < 0.05
Self-confidence	3.57	4.40	p < 0.05

Regarding session effectiveness (Table 2), participants identified Design Jam as the most impactful, citing its positive influence across various domains in the qualitative assessment, with the social competencies being perceived as the most targeted. Similar results were observed in other studies where participants were required to interact with each other in order to go through the speed-up creative process. The findings also revealed that people in such cases tend to “get out of the shell”, accept learning as an

affective process, and develop critical thinking. While the presentation skills seem to be reasonable in terms of the development of soft skills in the context of learning a different language or working in academia, in the chosen legal entity, presentations were supposedly deemed less effective, as they were observed to generate motivation primarily through the ICV-variable. More information on the effectiveness of the soft-skills development methods can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 – Evaluation of Soft Skills Development Techniques

Soft skills development techniques	Average effectiveness score (0-5)	Perceived the most targeted domain	Qualitative feedback for the technique	Qualitative feedback for the ICV-variable
Design Jam	4.7	Social Competencies	Commended for fostering various soft skills simultaneously and allowed the creative flow to nurture.	Participants noted that working on the personally relevant problems helped them to be more engaged in the process.
Role-Playing	4.1	Social Competencies	Participants found it effective in enhancing interpersonal skills mainly as it allowed to see colleagues in a new setting.	Role-playing was positively influenced by outdoor settings along with the integration of culture related situations which fostered the sense of unity.

Table continuation

Soft skills development techniques	Average effectiveness score (0-5)	Perceived the most targeted domain	Qualitative feedback for the technique	Qualitative feedback for the ICV-variable
Case Study	3.8	Occupational Behavior	Highlighted as beneficial for improving decision-making and action orientation.	Using of the regionally relevant cases for the analysis allowed to eliminate possible bias in leadership and helped to establish better discussions.
Presentations	2.5	Occupational orientation	Perceived as lacking in providing new soft skills.	Motivational factor was very helpful and provided additional boost to overcome public speaking fear and develop hard skills in preparation.

Importantly, these findings align with the established hypothesis (H_2), indicating that the incorporation of ICV-based peculiarities into the soft skills development practice significantly increased the acceptance rate of the foreign HRM practice. Even when participants found certain techniques less likable, the integrated ICV variable provided a motivational and conducive environment for active participation, affirming the hypothesis made in the introduction. Furthermore, it is possible to observe that the domains that were perceived to be most targeted by the participants in the most effective techniques showed the greatest level of improvement in terms of pre- and post-implementation assessment by BIP-based questionnaire (Table 1). Similarly, the least effective method showed lower performance in the 2-month timeframe. These results not only depict consistency of findings between self-reported and external evaluation but also support the ICV's importance in the implementation of foreign HRM practices because we can still observe some improvement even in the least accepted development technique.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comprehensive exploration of HRM methodologies, with a focus on ICV, has revealed valuable insights for enhancing soft skills within the legal entity "Pravozashchita" in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The literature review emphasized the importance of understanding HR practices across different countries, acknowledging variations and introducing the concept of ICV. The study's methods involved a case-study analysis within the organization, employing the Bochum Inventory of Personality and Competences questionnaire and ICV-based soft skills development techniques.

The results indicated a significant improvement in soft skills among participants after the ICV-

based program, with notable enhancements in social competencies. The statistical reliability of the study was validated through high Cronbach's alpha values, affirming the accuracy of the questionnaire and assessment methods. Participants expressed satisfaction with the program, demonstrating a positive attitude toward continued engagement. The effectiveness of different soft skills development techniques varied, with Design Jam receiving the highest average effectiveness score, aligning with participants' qualitative feedback and indicating the importance of tailored ICV integration.

The findings substantiate the initial hypothesis (H_1) that inter-country variability can define organization-specific incentives for soft skills development. The incorporation of ICV-based peculiarities significantly increased the acceptance of foreign HRM practices (H_2), showcasing the importance of considering local contextual factors. The study not only reinforces the importance of soft skills but also contributes to bridging the literature gap on tailored methodological approaches, particularly in the context of developing economies. In essence, the research underscores the practical applicability of ICV in implementing foreign HRM practices and highlights the significance of tailored soft skills development in diverse organizational settings.

The future directions of this work include conducting a long-term impact assessment to evaluate the sustainability of the implemented ICV-based soft skills development program, exploring cross-industry comparative analyses of HRM practices in Almaty, examining the adaptability of the ICV-based methodology to diverse cultural settings within Kazakhstan, and investigating the potential integration of technology-driven solutions to enhance HRM practices in similar multicultural environments.

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