

Testimonial from Soumia, an allochtonous in Flanders

Facts and figures on immigrants and their descendants are important, but the stories they can tell are important as well. At the M2M study visit in Mechelen, Belgium, in October 2008, the project team met with Soumia, an allochtonous - a young Flemish woman of Moroccan origin.

In Belgium the term "allochtonous" is used to identify first, second and third generation descendants of immigrants. They have Belgian nationality or are born in Belgium, but with ethnic-cultural roots elsewhere.

Today Soumia is running her own business, Alter consultancy. This is a company that has specialized in consulting companies on recruitment and selection, training, diversity management, marketing and communication. A new domain of her work deals with stimulating Belgian companies to explore markets in the Maghreb-countries and the Middle-East. She also encourages these companies to use the richness lying in the presence of fellow-citizens with an North-African or Arab background and to make the companies realize that this may imply commercial possibilities. They are ideal bridge builders. In Soumia's company, diversity, development and business meet each other.

Why did Soumia start her consultancy company?

The background for Soumia starting her own company was some concrete cases of conflict on the work floor due to the presence of diverse cultures. An example of one of those cases: a metal construction company in Antwerp had 95% of the workers which were allochtonous while the management and the secretaries were autochtonous Belgians. There had been conflicts on the work floor due to religious issues. Most of the workers were Muslims.

What provoked the conflict was that the workers decided to start praying during work hours. In order to have time to pray, they worked out a schedule where every worker took over tending the machine of another worker while the worker responsible for it was praying. All contributed five minutes of their break to do a take-over.

One moment the team leader found out that one of the workers was not working at his machine. He had not been informed about this arrangement, and consequently he thought the machine of the actual worker had been left unattended.

Surprisingly, the productivity had actually been rising in the company because the workers were more at ease, and they were sharing important moments with their colleagues. The problem was that the team leader did not know anything about this arrangement and he actually thought the workers were not doing their jobs. In this case the team leader didn't respect the background of his workers and the workers didn't respect the hierarchy in the company: there was a need for intercultural training on both sides to increase the communication.

This was the external reason why Soumia started her consultancy company. She realised that there was a business potential and a market for intercultural dialogue and conflict management. But Soumia also had a personal reason. As many allochtonous she had been pushed into a professional/technical orientation (secretary) at secondary school. She stopped studying when she was 18 but she was not comfortable with her education. She could not see any future for herself as a secretary. Anyway, after her degree, Soumia sought employment in Brussels. She had the advantage of being bilingual, she spoke both Dutch and French and she had no problem finding a job through an interim company. Soumia was then a commercial assistant, a job she found had no real content. The turning point came one day when she was asked to go out to buy a bottle of champagne for her boss' birthday. In her job Soumia found herself in a situation that many allochtonous people find themselves in: a job where her talents, potential and competences were not used. Consequently Soumia decided to go to university.

Today, Soumia has a degree in communication science and she is currently studying international politics. She has continued working during her studies. She was shocked to find out there were so many people – other allochtonous people - in the same situation as herself:

- the rate of allochtonous streaming from secondary education on to higher education is very low
- many of the allochtonous that continue in higher education drop out and do not finish their studies
- their competences are not used when they are employed, they don't find jobs on their level

Together with some fellow students, Soumia was active in an intercultural student-association to focus on those weak points. Also native Belgians took part in the movement. At that time, she was combining job and studies and they both integrated her interests. She was also very idealistic and wanted to change the world. The student group visited schools and wanted to appear as role models. Even with a university degree, the allochtonous do not get the same job opportunities as other Belgians. The focus of her student group was therefore on job possibilities for allochtonous people.

Soumia was also involved in the first Belgian international job fair (2007). More than 1200 visited the job fair. There were numerous testimonials and presentations of companies. But companies came more for purposes of marketing and advertising than for diversity. Because months later people didn't have jobs neither.

An additional reason why Soumia started her own consultancy company was that she realised that there is a mismatch between people having the competences and companies needing competence.

In Soumia's opinion it is now time to stop discussing and start acting. By this she means, among several things, that there is a need to develop diversity programs. A company she worked for asked her what they should do to guide allochtonous people to management level. Soumia's answer to this was that they have to provide role models. If all at the management level are autochtonous Belgians, it becomes

very difficult. She advised this company to develop diversity training programmes, to learn to discover talents in the work force, to learn to communicate with employees from different backgrounds. The company management should go to the work floor and discuss what is going on with the employees and to discover the organisational culture. Another advice was to use headhunting companies and hire allochtonous with management competences.

Today Soumia's consultancy company has several profit and non-profit companies and organisations as customers. She runs training sessions for managers but also for employees working on a more operational basis. First she undertakes an audit where she makes an analysis of the situation in order to decide on what training is needed in that particular company. In the choice Soumia makes for a certain approach, she feels the background of the company makes a difference. For instance, family companies tend to have another organisational culture than international companies in the sense that they are more patriarchal. But in general, there are no big differences between sectors.

Soumia's straightforward advice at the end of her testimonial is the following: Training and sensitising exercises are important. All the same, companies should not wait but rather find allochtonous with the competences the companies need and recruit them as managers. Her device out of her experience is: "You have to be like everybody to come in but not 'everybody' is like everybody else so companies must undertake efforts!"

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