

HOW WORK IS DONE IN RUSSIA? INTERVIEW WITH DR. FAYRUZA ISMAGILOVA

Dr. Fayruza Ismagilova is a work and organisational psychologist at Ural Federal University named after B. N. Yeltzin, and lives with her husband in Slovenia for the last one year and a half. On the 8th December she will give a lecture as a guest lecturer at Filozofska fakulteta in Ljubljana. She will talk about strategic thinking and how stereotypes influence management decision making in Russia.

We met on a sunny and surprisingly warm morning. Dr. Ismagilova kindly invited me to her home and almost immediately after handshaking we walked into the world of Russian work psychology as if we both long eagerly awaited this moment. When Fayruza Ismagilova talked about her professional career she just bloomed. She vividly led me to another time and little known culture, and I wanted to know everything. We bounced from serious topics to “Don’t write this – it’s just for us to smile.” After almost two hours we barely touched the questions I prepared beforehand. Surely, it would be a great pleasure to discuss them someday.

I would like to know more about you: who are you, where did you study, why psychology, why work psychology?

I was born in Moscow and I finished Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1977. I specialised in work and engineering psychology because my father was an engineer. He was a physicist and he worked in the physics nuclear field. I started to work in an aircraft military plant, because in that time psychologists worked mostly in large industrial enterprises. My duties were to sit in human resources (HR) department and interview workers, who decided to leave. I was asking them, why are they leaving, why aren’t they satisfied there and so on. (Laugh.) And I sat there for several months and asked and asked these questions. To me it was a very interesting experience.

Did you feel prepared for work and felt confident about your knowledge and skills after studies?

Yes, because as a student on the Moscow University I was a mentee for a year at a coat production factory. I collected data for my diploma thesis for which I received the title specialist of psychology. The diploma thesis was about optimising workplace of employees there. But it wasn’t my idea, to say the truth. It was my mentor’s idea. So, workers, mostly women usually performed only one operation – they made for example one stich on the coat’s sleeve. But there was one working place, where the worker had to make many operations in order to make the undercoat. She could do fewer operations in comparison to the workers who did only one stich. Therefore she received a lower salary and there was obviously a high rate of turnover. But I should repeat it was not my idea. My mentor, my professor demanded it. So thanks to her idea and her understanding of the situation we solved this problem and we presented the data to the management of the factory. This was my first working experience. There I could see with my own eyes that work psychologists can really improve something at a working place and save money for employers. After this experience, I wanted to do something practical and solve some problems. (Pause.) So, after the interviews on the military aircraft plant, I became a guide for school children there. My duty was to show them around and to explain them, how planes are constructed. And then I invited them to our special show room, where I gave them a questionnaire. And the main question was: ‘are you prepared to work for our plant?’ (Laugh.)

So you were supposed to make them feel excited about coming to work to this plant?

Yes, the idea was to promote jobs of this plant. It was also an interesting experience, because thanks to this questionnaire - I had the possibility to change the questionnaire as I wished – I could ask them to write down all the professions they knew. I discovered that they mostly knew professions they saw on TV, for example policeman, detective, spy, then the professions they heard about from their parents, for example engineer, military officer, government officer, and the professions they met face to face in their ordinary life, for example medical doctor, teacher. And that was it. Most advanced children could write not more than 20–30 professions, but in Russia we have about 10 000 professions. Most of our children couldn't imagine, how wide the range of professions is and so they chose their profession from a narrow range of possibilities. So I decided it's time to prepare my candidate thesis. In Russia we have to submit two theses in support of candidature for an academic degree. The first level is the candidate of science and the second is doctor of science. So my first thesis was about professional orientation for school children. Then I got my two sons and I devoted myself to them for a while. Then, when they were a bit older, I was invited to work in a scientific institute of professional education as a researcher. But it's not interesting, really.

So, first you became a specialist of psychology, then candidate of science, and then we skip the part of scientific institute of professional education?

Yes, it is not interesting. (Laugh.) So in 1993 I was invited to work in Russian Federation service for employment. They invited me to be head of chair and we prepared specialists for work, because the period from 1993 to 1998 was very difficult for Russia. It was the period of transformation of economy system and at that time unemployment rate was very high.

This is the period, when some people in Russia became rich overnight.

Yes, and on the other hand some people at once became very poor. In that period most Russian plants closed and the majority of people became unemployed. Monotowns were especially problematic. Monotown means 'town created enterprise'. It's a small town, where there is only one large factory, in which most inhabitants work. So we prepared a special training called Psychological support for specialists of service of employment. Namely during a day these specialists met face to face many unemployed people and they could give them only one type of answer: '*unfortunately we don't have any jobs*'. It was a tough job: some clients became angry and aggressive or started to cry. And that's why the service decided to prepare training for these specialists. Since they felt helpless, we taught them how to relax, to think about something nice and moreover we tried to boost their feeling of self-efficiency.

How did you do that? It sounds quite impossible.

(Laugh.) We worked out one interesting scheme. I don't think it is possible to describe it, but I am proud of it. I used it in my doctoral thesis. This is actually the reason, why I started to write my doctoral thesis. So, I collected a lot of data when I worked with these specialists. We helped them using BCG consulting roles matrix or Matrix of Boston Consulting Group. This matrix is usually applied when management is developing a market strategy. I decided to change this instrument from building market strategy to building a strategy for career management. It was very effective. We were also interested in why, in spite of the same difficult conditions, some people are more successful in searching for a job than others. Both

groups live in the same social conditions, in the same geographical area and have the same education, but one group finds a job and the other doesn't. We discovered - now I can say I discovered - the main difference was in the perception of their work experience. Those who couldn't find a job thought about their work experience as their main value and were convinced it should be of great value to the future employer as well. In the other group people thought their work experience had a high value for them, but not necessarily for the employer. They thought about their work experience as something that has a price on the labour market. If people understand the difference between the subjective and objective value of their work experience, they are more prepared for broadening them in order to meet the employer's needs and expectations. I called it Matrix of competitiveness of work experience. I worked out a special training for specialists and then they applied these trainings to unemployed people. And then I thought, oh, it is time to write my doctoral thesis. (Laugh.)

After I successfully presented my doctoral thesis I decided to try something new. I was invited as a psychologist at Presidential program of training managers of Russia enterprises. There I provided selection for attending this program. I was also invited to work as a psychologist at the Business School of Ural Technical University and became a head of chair of MBA (Master of Business Administration) program. There we also prepare trainings like team building and leadership. But I must say I don't like them very much. I prefer trainings, which help managers develop cognitive skills not communication skills. I like trainings that teach how to set goals and how to think strategically.

Among all trainings you think these are the most efficient?

Yes. Maybe team buildings works for some companies but not for companies like big enterprises. But in fact in Russia informal relations are very important and usually people are very close to each other. More close than in Europe. It is very easy to become friends with somebody in Russia.

Do these relationships help people get a job?

I think they don't. (Laugh.) If you belong to an informal group, you often accept its informal norms and these sometimes go against organisational norms. For example as manager you demand from employees to be punctual, but if co-workers are friends, they behold delicate information from management.

In Slovenia knowing people, having many strong connections helps when searching for a job. We are a small nation and quickly it comes to 'I know somebody that knows somebody'. So it so not uncommon that people are put on a work position they don't have the proper knowledge for and so they make poor performance. This is why I asked you, if having strong connections in Russia helps you when searching for a job.

In Russia managers prefer to hire unknown people, because in this case manager won't feel responsible for an employee and he will be free when making decisions about him or her. It is only business, not something personal.

You strictly separate work from private life?

Yes, we do. This is very important. But among employees, people become very close to each other. This is something typical for Russia. I don't know why, but it is something I could observe in many Russian

companies. Even if offered a better paid job elsewhere, people would refuse because of the good relationships with co-workers.

But if understood correctly, this is not something managers would like to happen?

Yes, managers are not satisfied with such situations. (Pause.) In Russia strong socialist tradition is still problematic. We haven't completely finished with the socialist regime. I refer to thinking about your company as if it is your property. When people come to work for a company they think, why couldn't I make some photocopies for my children? But this is not possible, because if I print, then my co-workers can print as well. And they are too many.

It is not very different in Slovenia. People are printing school assignments for their children; here and there they steal a pen ...

Yes, yes. We have a proverb in Russia: (Laugh.) 'If you didn't steal anything from work today, this day is lost'. (Laugh.)

It could be applied in Slovenia. (Laugh.) Now to conclude a question Slovenes are very interested in. How is Slovenia like to a foreigner? For how long have you been living in Slovenia now?

One year and a half.

All right, so you probably noticed some differences between Slovenia and Russia?

Oh, yes, many. (Laugh.) To start with similarities, because there are not that many: language. It was surprising to me. I don't understand when people speak Slovene – only some words here and there – but it feels like my native language (Laugh). About differences: maybe it's better, if you ask me specifically.

For example how people socialise in Slovenia and how people socialise in Russia?

Slovene people are more kind than Russians. They smile and greet more often, they are more opened. When my grandchild came to visit us in Slovenia, almost all neighbours came and gave him something small. They smiled and caressed his head. It feels comfortable being among Slovenes. The second difference is that most Slovenes that I meet speak English. In Russia, since we are a very big country, not many people speak a second language. Of course we learn English at school and at university, but Russian system for teaching English is not good. Next difference is, in Russia when I drive my car I am almost the only elderly woman on the road. Other drivers are faster and prepared to violate traffic rules. I'm not like that. I like things to run according to rules. Here everybody follow traffic regulations, so I feel very comfortable. And it is very calm and quiet here. In Russia it seems you have to run all the time: you run to work, from there to theatre, and then to friends. You are always running out of time, because the distances are so big. In Slovenia you can get almost everywhere in 30 minutes. (Pause.) I have one neighbour. She is very communicative. She likes to talk to me, to discuss all kinds of problems. I discovered how Slovenes are open to others. It's very touching.