THE MANAGEMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Abstract:
The accelerated development of information and communication technology, the transformation of business activity, which has become more global and competitive, and the prevalence of services based on knowledge and information led to the appearance of new models of virtual teamwork, more flexible and adaptive, which go beyond the classical functional departmental barriers and require the collaboration of employees with diverse skills, judgments and expertise. The COVID-19 pandemic event accelerated the adoption of these new work models worldwide at a scale never seen before. Cross-cultural virtual teams can be found in several fields, such as research and product development, quality circles, affinity groups, outsourcing teams, customer services, helpdesk services, academic and research groups. Under the framework of crossvergence theory, this conceptual article explores the contingencies of cross-cultural virtual teams, discussing its main challenges and explores a set of practices for multicultural team management in the virtual environment.

Keywords: multicultural, teams, virtual, management

1. Introduction

Modern trends in organisational practice emphasise the suppression of traditional functional barriers and the prevalence of work structured around projects, which require the contribution of employees with different skills and complementary expertise. As a company develops its international activities and feels the need to integrate the work of employees located in distinct physical spaces, it is no longer sufficient to adopt the

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classical organisational design based on rigid hierarchies and dedicated divisions, hence cross-cultural teamwork has become a commonly used integrating mechanism (Child, 2005; Liska, 2022).

Significant advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) have fundamentally altered all aspects of human work in the last decades, allowing for virtual working arrangements (Jurack, 2020; Velez-calle et al., 2020). Virtual teamwork appeared as a new work organisation paradigm that facilitates the integration of working activities developed in distant locations, favouring accountability and responsibility and promoting learning and innovation (Velez-calle et al., 2020). Virtual teamwork has become an organisational structure commonly used by multinational corporations (MNCs) to overcome the challenge of simultaneously decentralising and integrating the work developed by employees in distant locations. MNCs often recur to virtual teamwork to integrate the tasks developed by staff and supporting departments from headquarters, expatriates and local employees distributed in foreign subsidiaries (Henderson et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic caused one of the fastest adaptations in the history of societies, moving many organisations and teams entirely to virtual work (Burkart, 2022; Maurer et al., 2022; Logemann et al., 2022).

A cross-cultural virtual team (CCVT) can be defined as a group of persons, with different cultural affiliations, who collaborate to achieve common objectives, in a situation where at least one of the team members is geographically dispersed so that communication, coordination, and integration are achieved through electronic communication media (Cagiltay et al., 2015; Arora et al., 2019). Cross-cultural teams are unique because they integrate people from different cultural backgrounds with distinct affiliations of cultural significance. Compared to mono-cultural teams, they add a distinct set of challenges, which require specific management skills and organisational structures. Ralston and colleagues' seminal work on the impact of national culture and economic ideology on managerial work values (Ralston et al., 1993; Ralston et al., 1997) introduced the theory of crossvergence on cross-cultural studies. Crossvergence is defined as occurring when, at the level of the individual, the influences of national culture and economic ideology combine to produce a value system (Witt, 2008). This theoretical framework is applied in this article to argue how organizational values can contribute to minimize the problems arising from cultural diversity within CCVTs. The concept of crossvergence is vital to our position as it addresses the idea that organizational culture can impact peoples' values and identity.

This article identifies the main potential challenges in managing CCVTs and framed by crossvergence theory discusses a set of best practices in cross-cultural virtual team management. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: after this introductory section, section 2 identifies the main challenges faced by CCVTs. Section 3 explores a set of best practices for managing CCVTs, and the final section presents the conclusions.

2. Main challenges in managing cross-cultural virtual teams

CCVTs present several advantages and complex challenges. The potential advantages are related to higher flexibility, innovation, reduced time to market, the possibility to overcome time and space barriers, team member empowerment and motivation, cost savings, access to cheaper labour abroad, reduction in travel expenses and office space (Velez-calle et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2022). Frequently cited disadvantages of CCVTs identified in the literature include social isolation, reduced opportunities for social capital development, higher absenteeism, communication problems, role overload, role ambiguity, lack of synergy amongst team members, goal conflicts as a consequence of multiple reporting lines, costs of technology, data security and, most important, problems related with cultural barriers (Hertel et al., 2005; Symons & Stenzel, 2007; Ebrahim et al., 2009; Rios-Ballesteros & Fuerst, 2022).

Social isolation and the consequent lack of social interaction are the main concern in CCVTs. Cross-cultural team members can feel isolated, especially when they do not belong to the culturally dominant group within the team (Lee, 2009). Feelings of anonymity and low social interaction may lead virtual team members to social loafing and higher absenteeism. Thus, self-efficacy becomes difficult to maintain due to reduced feedback and trust (Guido Hertel et al., 2005; Burkart, 2022). Social isolation also affects the capacity of team members to develop their networks of social capital (Banks-Weston & Kolski, 2022).

Communication difficulties constitute another main concern in CCVTs since they can generate misunderstandings, decrease team cohesion and potentiate conflict (Zimmermann, 2011). The complexity is related to the use of different languages (MNE´s often define several functional languages), differences in accents and fluency, disparities in communication codes and culture-specific communication norms (Zimmermann, 2011; Lokhtina et al., 2022).

Brett et al. (2006) also highlight challenges related to distinct attitudes toward hierarchy, rules and authority. A specific concern in this dimension relates to the typical horizontal nature of virtual teamwork, which can be conjugated with considerable levels of group autonomy, delegation and empowerment, or parallel lines of the report (for example, in organisational matrix solutions or in a situation where an individual participates in several distinct team groups). This nature of structure can cause integration problems for employees belonging to societies characterised by higher levels of hierarchy distance, where status is a relevant issue, such as in India (House et al., 2004). Conflicts may arise in cross-cultural virtual teams because of communication problems, language barriers, and different cultural perspectives on decision-making and hierarchy. Cultural factors can also influence a leader's approaches to deal with team conflicts. For example, conflict and internal debate are considered fundamental step in the decision-making process in some cultures, whereas in others is negatively connoted (Hofstede, 1980).

Physical, cultural, and temporal dispersions in CCVTs impose significant leadership and management challenges (Mukherjee et al., 2012). Team leaders should be

able to coordinate and integrate the work produced by workers located in separate regions at different moments and to foster motivation, commitment, trust and positive working relationships. Integration challenges for virtual teams are considerably distinct from face-to-face teams. The absence of physical presence implies the need for appropriate forms of coordination, and tasks must be highly structured to facilitate integration. When designing CCVTs, organisations have to consider several fundamental issues, including the general objectives of the team, the virtual technology that might be suitable to achieve these goals, team composition and personnel selection, control and performance mechanisms, reward system design, training and development, task and job design and ethical issues. In the next section, we discuss these main challenges and explore a set of best practices to manage CCVTs.

3. Cross-cultural virtual team management

3.1. Strategies for dealing with cultural challenges

Theories of organisational demography, social identity and categorisation indicate a negative relationship between cultural diversity within group members and group cohesion and team efficiency due to reduced group identification (Sakuda, 2012; Žnidaršič et al., 2021; Kung et al., 2022; Yu & Yu, 2022).

A basic principle in CCTVs' management is that team members must be able to interpret the behaviour outside of one's cultural perspective (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Schnell & Ervas, 2022). The assimilation and recognition of cultural differences can potentially be facilitated by education and training (Symons & Stenzel, 2007). Classical dimensional models such as the ones developed by Hofstede (1980), Trompenaars (1993), and House et al. (2004) provide a goof foundation to infer the main differences between national cultures. However, as noted by cultural convergence theorists, macro influences such as globalisation, international trade, and technological advances have a profound effect on an individual´s values and beliefs, which are not captured by national cultural models that adopt a divergence perspective (Ralston 2007; Franco & Maggioni, 2022). On the other side, the cited models do not consider distinct cultural clusters within the same nation-state and the impact of business culture (Bakry & Growe, 2022). Several authors suggest that disaggregate approaches are more suitable when analysing countries with distinct cultural groups (e.g., Kelley et al., 2006; Bakry & Growe, 2022). Kelley et al. (2006) recommend caution when using cultural indicators since static approaches to culture can generate erroneous interpretations, especially in very dynamic contexts characterised by global competition.

Besides education and training, another activity to minimise the potential problems arising from cultural diversity is to select team members that exhibit intercultural competence. Holmes and O'Neill (2012, p. 709) define intercultural competence as "*the ability to interpret, evaluate and negotiate, based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in their own and other cultures, which may lead to some degree of acceptance of new ideas*". Team members with high intercultural competence may accept and provide reciprocal influence, fostering cohesion and enabling the

development of more creative approaches to solving problems, and attaining cultural synergies.

A third option involves the initiative of intercultural encounters that promote intercultural competence and cultural self-awareness. Managers can promote intercultural encounters in the initial stages and during projects to develop empathy and engagement with team members' values, attitudes and thoughts from distinct cultural backgrounds. The literature indicates that intercultural encounters can help team members to develop cultural self-awareness, meaning the capability of viewing others in the mirror of themselves (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Schnell & Ervas, 2022). Cultural awareness emerges through self-reflection during the interaction and constitutes a relevant process in transcending cultural biases and ethnocentrism (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Li, 2022). Ramthun and Matkin (2012) highlight the importance of bringing team members from a state of ethnocentrism, characterised by a reduced level of recognition and acceptance of cultural differences, to a state of ethnorelativism, with greater recognition and respect for different cultural values.

Leadership plays a key role in minimising cultural conflicts in CCVTs. The challenge in managing cultural conflicts effectively is to recognise the possible underlying causes of conflict and to intervene in ways that empower CCVTs members to deal with future challenges themselves (Brett et al., 2006). Brett et al. (2006) categorise the management challenges that arise in multicultural teams into four dimensions: direct versus indirect communication, trouble with accents and fluency, differing attitudes toward hierarchy and authority, and conflicting norms for decision-making. According to the author, managers' main role should be to attenuate the potential of conflict, and this can be accomplished through several solutions, including adaptation, which involves acknowledging cultural divergences openly and working around them; structural intervention consisting in altering the nature of the team, by changing groups or members, hierarchies or geographic locations; managerial intervention by defining procedures that take in consideration cultural differences and that are acceptable by team members or bringing in a higher-level manager; and solutions that involve the removal of team members that can cause conflicts.

Conflict in CCVTs can arise from decision-making differences and differing attitudes toward hierarchy and authority (Han & Hazard, 2022). For example, collectivist cultures characterised by a high level of uncertainty avoidance tend to demonstrate a more compassed process of decision, based on detailed analysis and a search for consensus. In contrast, individualist cultures tend to reach decisions faster (Hofstede, 1980). Brett et al. (2006) suggest an interesting approach to this particular problem, called fusion, based on the use of differentiated approaches related to particular aspects of each culture to attain the best practice. For example, and as exemplified by the author, to reduce conflicts involving the decision-making process in a team composed of members from the UK and the US, the team reached an understanding about the decision-making procedure that was not quite as fast as the Americans were familiar but that it was also not so thoroughly as the UK members would have. Meyer (2012) proposes a different set of solutions to attain the benefits of disagreement and confrontation in multicultural

teams, involving: preparing the team for the internal debate; depersonalising confrontation, implying that participants must openly discuss ideas without confronting the person responsible for these ideas; language adaptation, meaning that team leaders must avoid express direct disagreement. More rhetorical approaches asking people to explain themselves are preferred for promoting internal debate in cross-cultural teams.

3.2. Organisational culture for developing a sense of ownership and belonging

Definitions of organisational culture tend to include constructs such as organisational structure and rules, norms, values, shared experiences and stories that characterise an organisation (Mead and Andrews, 2009). This view of organisational culture implies a connection with the notion of cognitive social capital. The critical resources of the cognitive dimension of social capital include shared codes, norms and narratives that contribute to unified systems of meaning and representation among parties (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As such, the cognitive dimension of social capital affects the capability of actors to develop a mutual interpretative framework within which team members may share a vision and values (Pedrini et al., 2015). Hofstede (1980) argues that while values result from cultural influences at the national level, organisational culture relates to shared perceptions of practices in the working environment, implying that organisational values have no significant impact on the belief system of team members. This positioning is contradicted by convergence theorists, who argue that technological advances are the main driver of values formation in human societies and crossvergence theorists, that consider the dynamic influence of both societal values and economic ideology on value formation (de Boer & de Boer, 2022). Economic ideology can be defined as ''*the 'workplace philosophy' that pervades the business environment of a country*'' (Ralston et al., 1997, p. 179). Crossvergence underlines the reciprocal relationships of influence among national culture, ideology, and work values in driving change over time (Witt, 2008). On the other side, divergence can be understood as a movement away from cultural similarity (Kelley et al., 2006).

In accordance with crossvergence theory, a strong organisational culture can soften cultural conflicts and potentiate the development of trust between team members of CCVTs (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Symons & Stenzel, 2007; Davidaviciene & Al Majzoub, 2022). Managers cannot change national cultures but can mitigate their effects, using a range of mechanisms for conforming team members' behaviours that are directly tied to organisational culture, such as organisational values, mission statements, ethical codes, rituals and ceremonies, business structures, strategy, leadership and technology. Organisational culture can be a factor in the integration of CCVTs since it can positively influence team identification, contributing to feelings of ownership and belonging and promoting social cohesion within the CCVT (Maurer et al., 2022). Team identification is a process by which an individual sees the team as part of itself and forms a psychological bond with the group (Connaughton and Daly, 2004). Besides, field studies confirm that team identification facilitates group functioning, encourages internal helping, decreases absenteeism of employees, and correlates significantly with team effectiveness (Hertel et al., 2005; Cordery & Soo, 2012).

3.3. Leadership

Cultural diversity within CCVTs imposes particular leadership challenges. Virtual teamwork is usually presented as an alternative to more hierarchical structures and as an example of a fluid horizontal structure (Child, 2005). However, the optimal organisational arrangement for CCTVs can depend on multiple factors. For example, concerning the team's objectives, Bradford & Kozlowski (2002) argue that the complexity of the tasks should determine the appropriate type of virtual team. Whereas less complex tasks can recur to multiple team members´ roles, more complex tasks often demand individual specific roles in which leadership positions are important. The question then arises of what leadership style can be more effective in CCVTs.

Shared leadership, which some authors consider suitable for virtual teams (e.g., Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Symons & Stenzel, 2007), may be inappropriate in the context of CCVTs since some cultures are characterised by higher levels of hierarchy distance, in which members do not share an egalitarian vision of society. Companies need leaders with intercultural competence to realise the potential of cultural diversity as a source of competitive advantage. A basic principle is that managers cannot impose their cultural norms on members from other cultures (Mead & Andrews, 2009). Instead, managers should develop cross-cultural respect, capitalise on cross-cultural differences and implement an organisational system that can maximise the advantages of cultural diversity. Symons and Stenzel (2007) emphasise the importance of leaders' cross-cultural training to develop cross-cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is related to cultural awareness, appropriate attention to relationship building, monitoring and managing emotions, and empathy (Goodman, 2012; Al Dhaheri, 2022). Managers possessing cultural intelligence use cognitive processes and behaviours that stimulate openness to experience and forming high-quality relationships in culturally diverse environments (Goodman, 2012). According to Symons and Stenzel (2007), cultural intelligence can be taught, and with proper training and experience, managers may turn into valuable cross-cultural leaders in time. In a complementary perspective, Molinsky et al. (2012) point out "cultural code-switching" as a fundamental cross-cultural skill for managers. The authors identify cultural code-switching as the ability to adapt behaviour in specific situations to accommodate diverse cultural norms. It requires more than information and motivation. This skill is related to the capacity to manage the psychological challenges that arise when someone tries to translate cultural knowledge into action. More specifically, a leader may have a very good understanding of the culture of team members, but that doesn´t mean that he is able to use that information and translate this knowledge into effective management practices.

Transactional leadership is a leadership style that can potentially be effective in virtual teams formed by individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds since it encompasses an active and persuasive approach to leadership (Al Dhaheri, 2022). Transactional leadership involves defining team goals and exchanging material or psychological rewards when these goals are met (Huang et al., 2010). The reward system can be adapted to the specific aspects of the CCVT´s, such as members' cultural affiliation, task interdependence, autonomy, diversity, and degree of virtuality (Hertel et al., 2005).

By clarifying goals and reward contingencies, transactional leaders reduce uncertainty and can reward team members' behaviour that is culturally sensitive. With respect to cultural barriers, leaders of CCVTs must find ways of building team identification while acknowledging and respecting culture. For Symons and Stenzel (2007), appropriate remuneration measures may contribute to improve cross-cultural group working when the reward systems emphasise team or group performance. Another leadership style that may suit CCVTs is transformational leadership, which involves managing psychological factors, such as motivation and commitment, by inspiring team members to rise above their immediate and personal interests and focus on the group mission and vision (Davidaviciene & Al Majzoub, 2022). This leadership style can potentially overcome cultural barriers by reinforcing the sense of belonging to the group.

In relation to the reward system mechanisms, some authors (Hertel et al., 2005) suggest that skill-based reward systems, in opposition to work-based pay systems, have the advantage of promoting learning, knowledge transfer, and the acquisition of new skills. However, members' total contribution to the CCVTs involves befits that are difficult to objectively measure, such as team spirit, knowledge transfer and cultural tolerance. Furthermore, research indicates that collective-based reward systems have the potential to develop group cohesion, cooperation and interaction among CCVTs members. A study conducted by Hertel et al. (2004) that involved two large corporations in Germany, a country that usually is classified as exhibiting a more individualist culture (Hofstede, 1980), concluded that using team-based rewards was positively correlated with team effectiveness. A reasonable approach would involve using a mixed set of key performance indicators, some individual and other group related, some objective and directly tied to measurable outputs, and others that depend on the team's leader's subjective evaluation.

Managers' recruiting of virtual team members is particularly challenging. Since CCVTs often encompass the combination of geographically distributed core competencies, one of the main selection criteria when recruiting team members is professional skills (Ebrahim et al., 2009). However, other attributes should also be considered. Based on research involving conventional teamwork, Hertel et al. (2005) highlight the importance of cognitive abilities, taskwork-related attributes and socio-emotional attributes, such as emotional stability, agreeableness, and predisposition to teamwork. In addition, given the conditions of CCVTs which involve the intensive use of technology, the possibility of social isolation and cultural diversity, expertise in information technologies, self-sufficiency and intercultural sensitivity can also be considered important skills.

As previously noted, a specific problem of virtual work is the possibility of social isolation. Participative management, the feeling of a caring organisation, and increased communication for trust building can reduce the possibility of social isolation within CCVTs (Burkart, 2022). In terms of practical measures, Lee (2009) suggests that managers can allocate office space for visiting virtual team members, developing the feeling of team inclusion. In-person social events, such as occasional personal meetings, also constitute a potential mechanism to connect virtual workers and reduce feelings of social isolation.

ICT provides the supporting infrastructure for virtual teaming. A significant number of software systems and tools have appeared in the last 30 years to support virtual team working, including synchronous and asynchronous solutions: instant messaging and chat tools (e.g. yahoo messenger, skype, Msn messenger); groupware services (e.g. Wrike, Project Manager, Jira, Trello, Clarizen); remote access and control tools (e.g. Net Meeting, Remote desktop, Web Ex), web conferencing (Zoom, Clickmeeting, GoTo Meeting, Google Meet, Calendly, Cisco Webex Meetings); file transfer tools (e.g. intranets, Google Drive, WeTransfer, Hightail, Dropbox); e-mail (several free options); audio conference tools (e.g. Nextiva, VidyoConnect, StartMeeting); social network platforms (e.g. Facebook). Recognising that people from distinct cultural affiliations can have different understandings and predispositions to use virtual technology is important. On the other side, not all regions benefit from similar levels of connectivity, and the technology background of team members can be very diverse. Team leaders should facilitate technology adaptation and take full advantage of the vividness of information technologies to make their presence more explicit and to develop a sentiment of care and trust by giving constant feedback to team members. The real-time synchronous feedback from team leaders can enhance trust and facilitate adaptation because team members can make immediate adjustments to their practice (Charteris et al., 2021).

According to Hamilton et al. (2009), to solve cross-cultural ethical conflicts, leaders should spread ethical principles throughout the organisation, considering the legal environment, the cultural dimension of the questionable practice and the firm´s core values and conduct. "E-ethical" is a term used by Lee (2009) to describe the pertinence of ethical considerations in virtual team leadership. This author explores several themes of e-ethical leadership, including unethical behaviours that could be perceived as so under Kant's ethical principles. Kantian ethics, which can serve as a framework of general ethical standards, defend that people should be treated with respect and never exploited as a means to an end (Nelson & Quick, 1996). Kant´s ethical principles can be seen as overstrict in the sense that workers in a capitalistic society serve the interests of an organisation. For example, a basic measure of control, such as performance evaluation to encourage CCVTs productivity, would be morally wrong under Kant´s principles. Control and evaluation should be considered ethical behaviours when they are guided by principles of fairness and respect for cultural diversity and are involved in a caring environment, with frequent feedback and genuine interest in members' wellbeing.

The problem of defining moral and ethical standards in a cross-cultural context is related to the fact that ethical principles are not the same across different cultures. Cross-cultural ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is a specific branch of philosophy that studies questions about morality and ethics in different cultures. Factors such as geographic region, organizational culture and other factors, like gender and life stage, must be taken into account to gain an understanding of ethics, in the workplace (Ralston et al., 2009). In the face of ethical challenges, managers usually adopt a posture that reflects their home country's ethical standards and acceptable codes of practice (Lee, 2009). Moral relativism, a situation where managers only comply with domestic or local

ethical values, is not a suitable approach when managing CCVTs. A possible answer to this dilemma is to address ethical issues from a global perspective. The benchmark can be universal ethical standards such as the Declaration of Human Rights, which is ratified by many nations. Another solution to develop ethical principles is to define a code of conduct. The definition of explicit codes of conduct as a mechanism to guide ethical behaviour is only effective if these principles are interiorised by CCVTs' members. According to Lee (2009), when team members are engaged in defining a code of conduct, they are more likely to accept the code norms and adopt ethical standards.

4. Conclusion

This work focused on multicultural management in the virtual project setting. It summarised the most important challenges concerning CCVTs, and reflected on a set of best practices. The main difficulties in managing CCVTs teams are related to the nature of the virtual environment's impersonal relationships and cultural differences within the group. People from different cultural backgrounds may have diverse perspectives on decision-making, leadership roles, hierarchy and authority, and conflict resolution. The argument that cultural diversity can contribute to competitive advantages is politically attractive because it emphasises the integrated nature of contemporary societies and the principles of interdependence, complementarity, and inclusiveness. However, the empirical evidence required to confirm or reject this assumption is currently scarce. Under the theoretical framework of crossvergence theory, it was argued that organisational culture, appropriate leadership and ethics can contribute to developing a sense of ownership and belonging, promoting social cohesion and optimizing teamwork in CCVTs.

Conflict of interest statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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