

A MANAGEMENT MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL VIRTUAL WORK TEAMS¹

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ABSTRACT

The globalization, the changes within the organizations, the mutations of the employment market imply that the use of Intercultural Virtual Work Teams (IVWT) become a normal aspect within all organizations. The management of an IVWT whose members are geographically dispersed represents a real challenge. Some argue that within those teams the cultural factor has no implications, since the contact of the members themselves is being achieved only within the virtual space. Our opinion is that the situation is quite opposite. We should be able to find elements of the cultural national dimensions which are influencing IVWT. If they are ignored, by non implementing a intercultural management, they could become an obstacle to achieving the desired IVWT performance. A such example of a company which, by its specific activities, uses extensively IVWT, is Delamode Group BV. It has premises in UK, with branches and locations within many Asian and European countries. In Romania it is represented by Delamode Romania SRL.

Introduction

Teams are the most powerful problem solving mechanism in today's arsenal of organizational tools. (Bob Waterman).

The traditional type work teams are now being replaced by new types of teams of emerging and developing very fast, teams with „variable geometry” [1], such as: Intercultural Work Teams (IWT), geographically dispersed or not, within those teams the communication is therefore being completed by personal meetings using virtual electronic means (videoconference, chat, etc). Obviously, the IT era induce radical changes [2] in the way of communication in these teams.

We define IWT as a team whose members belong to various national cultures. The IWT are very diversified and thus their potential for creativity and innovation is far superior that of the cultural homogenous teams [3]. One must have also in mind that the members of an IWT should have time to meet [4], in order to discuss the similarities and differences related to their own culture. All

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virtual work teams (VWT) geographically dispersed or not, their members being within the same physical space or not, - represent teams whose members act mainly in virtual space and meet face to face only occasionally, usually having a temporary member status [5]. Effective management of such teams is very different from those applied to traditional teams.

Next we present a classification of the *virtual teams* from the point of view of collocation and cultural component. According to figure 1 we identify six types of VWT:

- (1) organizationally intercultural, geographically dispersed;
- (2) *nationally intercultural*, geographically dispersed (*IVWT*);
- (3) organizationally intercultural, within the same physical space;
- (4) *nationally* and organizationally *intercultural*, geographically dispersed (*IVWT*);
- (5) *nationally* and organizationally *intercultural*, within the same physical space (*IVWT*);
- (6) culturally homogenous, within all above forms.

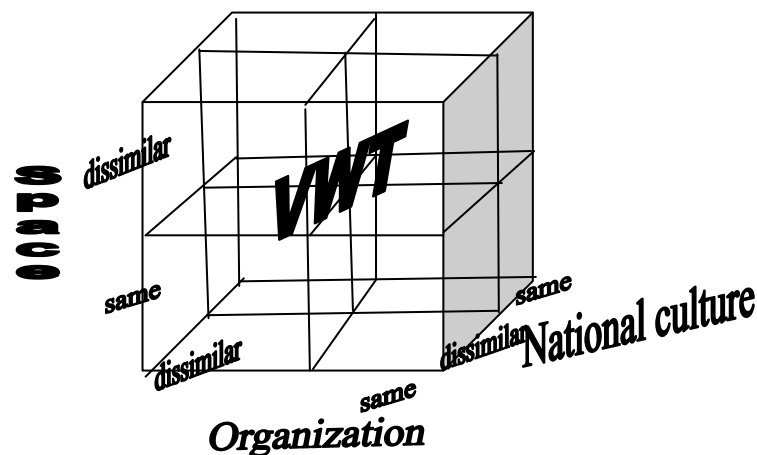


Figure 1 Virtual Work Teams

We consider that relevant cultural factors are: country of origin, ethnic identity, generational culture and professional culture. They are related to each of the team members, and heavily influenced by all their life and career. We also add their degree of exposure to other cultures, that is their cultural awareness and understanding of uniqueness of each culture and the challenging relationship with people from other cultures [6]. We must underline that we discuss only the national cultures, and do not take into account the other forms of culture.

Time and space are the coordinates under which the interaction between people resides. The acquirement of knowledge, team learning, represent specific interaction forms. The communication networks allow interconnection and interacting [7] of *IVWT* members and their actions. We consider *IVWT*

effectiveness possible because it supports the management specific of the structure of those teams, not because the high-tech communication replaced human relations.

IVWT geographically dispersed

Which are the factors [8] with cultural connotation that affect the IVWT performance? We should mention:

1. *Communication.* The members situated in different locations are deprived of the face-to-face communication. They are not able to express immediately opinions, attitudes towards a certain problem, or even emotions. We consider also its explicit or implicit aspect.

2. *Time aspect.* Within some situations, IVWT's members cannot meet not even virtually on certain hours, should we consider the major difference between time zones. That is a serious problem, for cultures where an immediate response is required [9].

3. *Trust and loyalty towards each other.* The link between trust and performance is difficult to achieve within a IVWT. Individualists sense heterogeneity as a multiple possibility to solve problems, without the necessity of personal relations within the team. Collectivists usually concentrate their effort, initially, to form personal interrelations, which are to form the base of the confidence towards each other [10].

4. *Spoken language.* There is no doubt that no performance can be achieved within an IVWT in the absence of a common language, well spoken by all members, which is to be used for the communication process. Anyway there will be problems generated by partial understanding of words or phrases, different translations of elements.

5. *Stereotypes.* Even though they represent only stereotypes and not real elements, they are going to play a key-part, being thus the first reference element for the examination of the members behavior.

6. *Intercultural competence.* We consider that in order to fight the diversity of cultural aspects involved within IVWT, the development of the intercultural competence is a priority, both to the manager and the other members of the team.

7. *Management of knowledge.* All members of the team must receive support and personally use their experience within the IVWT, thus being an effective source [11] of information concerning the cultural competence, information which should be recorded at team level and shared between its members.

Management model of IVWT

We developed a model of the IVWT management, based on The global virtual team performance model [12], The integral team effectiveness measure [13] and The lifecycle model of virtual team management [14].

Figure 2 Management model of IVWT

Geografically dispersed intercultural virtual teams of Delamode Group BV

Delamode Group BV, premises in Great Britain, with branches and working points in many Asian and European countries (including Romania), is a logistics and freight forwarding company.

Delamode uses mainly English for its corporative communication. The company conducts its activity thru executive teams, departments and intercultural project teams. Such example is IVWT, under which direction a contract for a specific client is in course, formed by managers from Romania, England and Austria. Each member has under its direction teams formed of persons coming from different countries (The linkpin system of Likert: each local team manager is also member of the IVWT and represents a link between the two teams).

There is no intercultural training in this company. The reason is that managers of IVWT are selected from people having international work experience. As means of communication the company uses email, teleconferences, a VPN

(Virtual Personal Network) which enables network conversations and access to various data. In order to avoid malfunctions generated by the lack of personal communication, replaced by e-mail conferences, there are periodical team-buildings, in various locations, as „common space”.

In order to present an cultural diagnosis of this IVWT we list bellow on Table 1 the values for the nine cultural society dimensions for each country and group under analysis.

Table 1 Society cultural values according to Globe Model

	Austria	England	Romania	Au/ En	Au/ Ro	En/ Ro
As Is						
Power distance	4.95	5.15	5.63	0.2	0.68	0.48
Uncertainty Avoidance	5.16	4.65	3.66	0.51	1.5	0.99
Institutional Collectivism	4.3	4.27	3.75	0.03	0.55	0.52
In-Group Collectivism	4.85	4.08	5.43	0.77	0.58	1.35
Gender egalitarianism	3.09	3.67	3.88	0.58	0.79	0.21
Assertiveness	4.62	4.15	4.14	0.47	0.48	0.01
Human Orientation	3.72	3.72	4.09	0	0.37	0.37
Performance Orientation	4.44	4.08	3.51	0.36	0.93	0.57
Future orientation	4.46	4.28	3.56	0.18	0.9	0.72

By applying the ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) statistical test we obtained the following results: in all three situations (Austria/England, Austria/Romania, England/Romania) ensue that $F < F_c$ (Fischer Test). These results show that, *statistically speaking*, there is a cultural homogeneity within the studied team.

But, according to Table 1, we observe that some cultural dimensions have major differences between values (proximity matrix), that question the homogeneity of the team: Uncertainty Avoidance – the Austrians and the English make a good team together, being known that Romanians have a lower incertitude tolerance; In-Group Collectivism – the Austrians collaborate better with Romanians; Future orientation – Romanians are the ones that don't fit very well within the team.

We can say that the studied *team is culturally not homogenous* from the point of view of the mentioned differences. This statement is confirmed by the framing of the three countries in different clusters, according to research Globe, respectively: The Germanic Europe Cluster, The Anglo Cluster and The East European Cluster.

The above shows that the ANOVA test is not the most fitted to identify team intercultural aspects.

Conclusions

IVWT can be efficiently managed by understanding the importance of the cultural background and its impact on individual values, emotions and human behavior. Examples of teams that include project teams [16], executive teams, departmental teams, etc. show that the organizations and people can have a lot of benefits by being aware of some differences, but also similarities in their cultures and taking advantage of this diversity!

Our observations also pointed out that it is preferable that an IVWT manager is intercultural competent and multilingual, with the purpose of motivating the IVWT members to fully explore, exploit, and transfer valuable knowledge inside the team.

The teams that combined the use of technology with the necessary discipline to build common beliefs, trust and a common virtual working space (case of Delamode team), got very close to this accomplishment.

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