

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF TEAMWORK AND TEAM MANAGEMENT FORCED BY COVID-19

Introduction

For many organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a tough test to their way of working. Most had to rapidly react to the crisis and to the multiple challenges it brought for management as well as for the entire workforce. Nearly overnight these enterprises had to alter their operating models to respond to to-date unanticipated demands [Carnevale, Hatak, 2020]. The requirement to limit the spread of the virus, through social distancing, pushed most to introduce remote work [Toniolo-Barrios, Pitt, 2021]. Employees were asked to use digital tools, including video conferencing, to work from home [Richter, 2020]. There was a surge in the number of virtual teams [Mysirlaki, Paraskeva, 2020], defined as small, temporary groups whose members are distributed across time zones and locations, dependent on ITC technologies to effectively communicate and to coordinate their work [Jarvenpaa, Leidner, 1999; Ale Ebrahim, Ahmed, Taha, 2009]. The transition to remote work, with flexible hours and job demands, made it possible for office work to continue, and to ensure that highly qualified staff could be retained [Chudziński, Cyfert, Dyduch, Zastempowski, 2020].

The remote work model blurred the to-date boundaries between work and private life [Toniolo-Barrios, Pitt, 2021]. Additionally, as schools closed their doors many parents had to juggle work with childcare [Gorlick, 2020]. Yet, the biggest challenges of remote work were not of logistical but of psychological nature, i.e., isolation,

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difficulties with communicating and collaborating with co-workers, emotional and physical exhaustion caused by unending video conferences aka ‘zoom fatigue’, no option to disconnect from work after hours, demotivation, decreasing effectiveness, rising stress, deteriorating psychological wellbeing, and greater risk of domestic violence [Fosslien, Duffy, 2020; Papandrea, Azzi, 2020; Routley, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios, Pitt, 2021]. All remote employees are at risk of isolation and loneliness, in particular if required to work from home for longer [Donthu, Gustafsson, 2020]. Yet, additionally, fears of redundancies and layoffs, pay cuts, or trimmed work benefits prompted worries about the future.

Leadership is being tested in ways the world hasn’t seen in generations [Abrams, 2020]. The transition from real time to virtual leadership was a test of strength for many managers as well as organizations [Mysirlaki, Paraskeva, 2020]. Virtual teams face many challenges related to management, coordination and supervision [Mysirlaki, Paraskeva, 2020]. The quality of the interactions in a team, which are more difficult to maintain on long distance, largely depend on effective leadership [Malhotra, Majchrzak, Rosen, 2007]. Yet, the fact that employees switched to remote mode literally from one day to the next meant that organizations did not have time to prepare their managers to be effective leaders in this new reality [Newman, Ford, Marshall, 2020]. According to research, leaders have to focus on task execution and on building relationships if they want to ensure their subordinates continue to work effectively in a virtual environment [Bartsch, Weber, Büttgen, Huber, 2020]. Employees expect their manager to provide guidance, comfort and hope, and clear information [Lagowska, Sobral, Furtado, 2020]. Strong and effective leaders can help employees remain physically and mentally healthy (e.g., lower levels of anxiety, depression and stress); they can also affect lower absenteeism and attrition, and thus drive better work performance and results [Papandrea, Azzi, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios, Pitt, 2021].

In uncertain times, the need for a strong, confident and trustworthy leader is greater than ever. There are several approaches to improving managers’ communication skills, in order to build trust and minimize stress and anxiety among employees. For example, such a leader has to effectively manage stress, share information with empathy and optimism, use credibility to build trust, be honest and transparent, keep his subordinates informed on an ongoing basis, provide a forum for feedback, and be a role model [APA, 2020].

Organizational support has been important for employees during the pandemic, as many of them had never earlier worked remotely. The necessary tools, procedures and virtual setting were all new to them. They felt huge pressure and had no time to transition to or test out the new tools and grow accustomed to the related changes in social norms and work practices. At the same time, they were more emotionally fragile and fearful because of a risk of infection (with COVID-19), more anxious and

stressed [Richter, 2020]. According to research conducted by Errichiello, Pianese [2021], organizations must provide holistic support to those who work remotely, with formal procedures, appropriate assessment systems, tools for self-management, training programs, to facilitate a collaborative work environment and leadership style. During the pandemic, employees also needed technical support, access and training on new technologies; they also had to multitask and solve problems related to continuous connectedness and non-stop access to supervisors and co-workers [Errichiello, Demarco, 2020; Richter, 2020].

Both formal and informal communication now takes place via digital channels, which enable the social and professional integration of those who work remotely [Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, Bendz, 2020]. Despite this, many employees were not prepared and needed the help of their supervisors to establish a flexible balance between their work and private life [Richter, 2020; Svensson, Koistinen, 2021; Toniolo-Barrios, Pitt, 2021]. In this context, employees demand information and ongoing communication; this may include information on changes in health and safety regulations, or about opportunities available for personal development and training, which could help them in adjusting to changes in roles and requirements [Carnevale, Hatak, 2020].

Since 2020, remote or hybrid work models have been broadly introduced even by organizations which were not prepared, both in terms of the needed technical infrastructure as well as organizationally. Yet, the lengthiness of the pandemic was conducive to employees and employers successfully transitioning to the new modes of working and recognizing their benefits [Urbaniec, Małkowska, Włodarkiewicz-Klimek, 2022]. The work revolution triggered by COVID-19 has altered and will continue to alter the way in which companies and their employees interact, necessitating a continuous re-evaluation and re-invention of approach to working, leading to new modes of operation and to profound changes in the workplace [de Lucas Ancillo, del Val Núñez, Gavrila, 2021]. It is likely that the hybrid work model will become the new normal, and people will have to adopt new work habits. In this new reality, organizations that can surmount the challenges unique to managing virtual teams will be the winners [Van Buggenhout, Murat, De Sousa, 2020].

Though for many global teams, online meetings have been the norm for quite some time, the sudden transition to a fully remote way of working has not been simple. This inspired the authors to conduct a study on an expert team working remotely in a large global corporation. The objective of the research was to identify the key changes that the pandemic effected in teamwork, as well as challenges of managing a team in a crisis (pandemic). Our findings show that despite many difficulties, the success of the analyzed team was dependent on supportive and empathetic leadership, teamwork, and good communication.

1. Methods

The research focused on challenges forced by the COVID-19 pandemic both on managers and employees from the perspective of select facets of virtual way of working, highlighted both by theorists as well as practitioners [Crummenerl et al., 2020]: effective leadership, motivation, and collaboration and creativity. The authors decided exploratory qualitative research would be the best approach to investigate the topic using the sample population.

To understand well any phenomenon, it is necessary to start by looking at it in broad, non-specialized terms. Exploratory research enables just that. Many have provided detailed guidance on how to conduct exploratory research in social sciences [including Stebbins, 2001; Waters, 2007; Swedberg, 2020], which can be summarized as an investigation into a research question not studied in depth to date. While both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can be applied in exploratory research, this type of research is often qualitative in nature, and even if it has a quantitative component, it is initiated through a qualitative exploration. Importantly, it is applied in an area where there is a lack of pre-existing knowledge or paradigm, with a view to understanding more about the particular topic without any preconceived assumptions. The researcher begins without a precise hypothesis, by validating a few variables, in order to identify any material dependencies that can be used to refine the initial hypothesis and lead to further study. Such an approach is only explanatory in nature, allowing the researcher to look at a given topic thru the eyes of the respondents, observe and study the phenomena. Making sense of the results and their qualification may thus be defined by the research question and objective, making a research hypothesis and its verification unnecessary [Czernek, 2014]. To begin, we conducted a review of scientific literature on the topics of teamwork and team management during a crisis (pandemic) and qualitative research methods were applied, i.e., a survey and an interview. A computer assisted web interview (CAWI) was conducted between December 2021 and January 2022. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to freely and honestly disclose their views on teamwork and on support their manager provided while they were working remotely. Members of surveyed team resided in nine countries (Poland, India, Singapore, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, United States and UK). Meanwhile, the team manager was interviewed in the second half of January 2022, in the form of a face to face interview with the researchers.

The surveyed population was intentionally selected. Purposive sampling is a non-random method for selecting a sample population which thus includes individuals selected by researchers based on defined criteria (such as gender, age, education, profession). For the purposes of our research, the respondents were selected as

they all belonged to one expert team in a large international organization and all worked fully remotely during the pandemic. The gathered data were analyzed via content analysis.

2. Results

The survey was conducted among an expert team working in one of the largest and oldest business outsourcing centers in Poland. The center's parent company is a global giant with over 300,000 employees worldwide, including 11,000 in Poland.

The expert team of 27 persons established in 2021, specializes in providing account based marketing support to sales teams that work with the company's largest clients. The team includes marketing advisors, who work with sales and delivery staff to recommend which marketing approaches to use to reach specific clients. The advisors are supported by a team of developers, designers and writers who create the required assets and activate outreach campaigns across various online and offline channels.

The surveyed population includes 23 women and 14 men. While diverse in age, from below 25 to above 45, over 40% of the team was aged 36–45, 24% was 31–35, and 16% was 26–30 years of age. Members of the team reside in Poland (13), India (14), Singapore (1), Australia (2), Germany (1), Switzerland (2), Sweden (1), United States (1), UK (2) and most often work with peers from France, UK, Netherlands, Germany, United States, India, and Poland. The type of work and tasks engaged in by the surveyed team classified it as a virtual team.

Due to the small size of the surveyed population, the survey results are not representative and cannot be generalized to apply across the organization. Nevertheless, they do provide insight on trends observed in the surveyed professional group, including attitudes and reactions towards the challenging situation of the pandemic. Therefore, it is possible to arrive at a qualitative assessment of the analyzed problem.

The objective of the survey was to understand how employees perceive their working conditions during the pandemic, what difficulties they faced as they worked remotely, what kind of support was dispensed by the employer as well as their manager, and what kind of a work model would they prefer in the future (post pandemic). The analysis also looked at challenges of teamwork and the leadership model adopted by their manager. All the excerpts are cited as provided by the respondents, save for any spelling errors; information is provided on the cited respondent's gender, age, and home location. The article's scope limits what could be presented, thus only an excerpt of the gathered information is analyzed below.

If we were to sum up what 90% of respondents miss the most during the analyzed period, we could say it in one word: "people!". Team members provided numerous examples of what they missed: working together with others on new ideas: "*team*

collaboration on new initiative” (man, 31–35, Pune); *“quality interactions*” (man, 36–45, London); *“sharing ideas, helping, brainstorming together*” (woman, 31–35, Cracow); physical interactions, both with their manager and team members: *“physical meeting with team members*” (man, 31–35, Kolkata); *“team bonding*” (man, 36–45, Pune); *“catch-ups with team members, connect with senior leaders*” (woman, 31–35, Singapore); *“face to face conversations*” (woman, 36–45, Sidney); *“the freedom to connect in person with the team*” (woman, 31–35, Bangalore); informal meetings during work time and after work: *“chit-chatting, eating lunch together, laughing*” (woman, 36–45, Cracow); *“watercooler chats*” (woman, 36–45, Mumbai); *“informal gatherings in the kitchen or over a beer in the evenings*” (man, 31–35, Cracow). Respondents also missed *“the vibe of the office and the environment*” (man, 36–45, Mumbai), *“schedules*” (woman, 26–30, Nashik), *“commuting (by bike), home as a private sphere*” (woman, 36–45, Nuremberg) and *“me-time during travel hours*” (woman, 31–35, Mumbai).

Team members listed many difficulties they faced while working remotely, for example: *“many distractions at home*” (man, 31–35, Cracow) and separating work from private life: *“You are never off from work, lack of real time when work is ‘off’ – work seems always on*” (woman, 46 and older, Cracow); *“lack of defined space between work and personal life (often I end up taking late calls because ‘anyway I am home’)*” (woman, 46 and older, Cracow). This has created a *“temptation to either switch off completely or stay connected all the time*” (woman, 31–35, Bangalore). Respondents also experienced problems of a psychological nature because of the fully virtual setting. They faced *“boredom*” (woman, 31–35, Cracow), *“routine*” (woman, 26–30, Zurich) and *“the feeling of loneliness and stuck in your own glass jar*” (man, 36–45, London). Respondents mentioned a lack of *“human connection*” (man, 26–30, Zurich) and *“less human touch*” (man, 31–35, Cracow). They found it difficult that *“you cannot walk up to someone and discuss things*” (man, 36–45, Mumbai) and that there was a *“lack of personal connections*” (woman, 46 and older, Cracow) and *“minimal contact with other people*” (man, 36–45, Cracow). They also faced challenges in working remotely as a team: *“motivation without meetings – when I’ve got not many appointments I find it difficult to focus*” (woman, 36–45, Nuremberg), *“coordination with team members is a bit more difficult*” (man, 46 and older, Bristol) and miscommunication leading to misunderstandings among team members: *“it is easier for people to avoid you, if they don’t deliver something on time*” (woman, 31–35, Goteborg); *“misunderstanding through written form. It is much stronger than when talking. More difficult to soften unpleasant feedback*” (woman, 36–45, Cracow). Only two from among the surveyed population stated that they did not experience any difficulties in the analyzed period.

Despite the challenges, respondents also recognized some benefits of remote work. More than half appreciated the time savings of not having to travel to the office: *“I don’t lose time for commuting, it gives me 1hr a day for other activities*” (woman, 36–45, Cracow) and ensuring a balance between work life and home life: *“I have a better*

work life balance when working from home and it is easier for me to take a break when I want to or to go for a walk” (woman, 31–35, Goteborg), “I have more control over my time and I am more productive when I work and do not have to pretend that I am working when I have had enough for the day” (woman, 36–45, Cracow). For some, virtual work is more conducive to concentration and being productive: “I work faster and I am more efficient” (man, 26–30, Zurich); “high productivity. You are able to finish your work quickly since there are lesser distractions” (man, 36–45, Mumbai); “I am more focused when working from home and for sure more productive” (woman, 31–35, Goteborg); “possibility to start later or finish things quicker” (man, 36–45, Cracow). Respondents appreciated having more time for themselves and their loved ones: “More time spent with family” (man, 46 and older, Bristol); “flexibility to plan work around family plans” (woman, 31–35, Singapore); “staying with our loved one” (man, 31–35, Jalgaon Jamod); “easier to combine with home life” (woman, 36–45, Sidney); “all my home work can be done simultaneously” (woman, 36–45, Nuremberg); “I can manage my life as parent much better because I have time to pick up my children from school and spend time with them, adjusting my working schedule accordingly” (woman, 31–35, Cracow) and “flexibility to manage non-work responsibilities” (woman, 36–45, Mumbai). Though perhaps not surprising, the benefits to homelife and household work were recognized only by female respondents. Working from home also enhances mobility: “I can work from anywhere in Poland” (man, 31–35, Cracow); “I can work out whenever there is a break in meetings, not just before or after going into the office” (woman, 36–45, Miami Beach); “you get chance to learn and get more opportunity to work globally” (man, 26–30, Pune); “working for an office located in different city” (man, under 25, Cracow). Two respondents in fact pointed out that the work they do now would have not been possible had it not been for the virtual work setting: “This in fact helps me connect my team members working on different time zones” (woman, 26–30, Nashik), and “If there was no remote option I’d not be able to work in my current team” (woman, 46 and older, Sydney). Among the benefits, there were also those, summed up in a light manner by one respondent: “no need to get up early and dress up neatly” (woman, 36–45, Cracow).

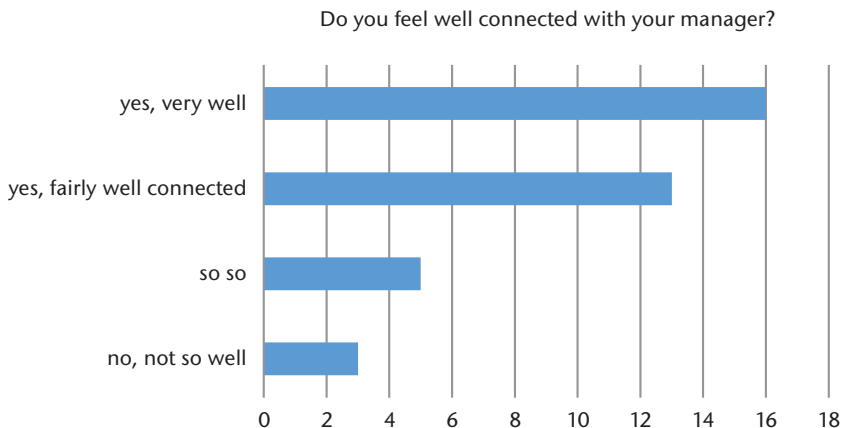
Team members were also asked what kind of support – as individuals and as a team – they received from both their employer and their manager. Respondents felt the company kept them well informed, providing “regular update emails about organization” (woman, 26–30, Mumbai); “multiple training sessions” (man, 36–45, Cracow); “access to a lot of software” (man under 25, Cracow) as well as “various online events and communication to ensure that we are updated with the current org happening” (woman, 36–45, Mumbai).

When working remotely, one has the right tools and conditions to work effectively and efficiently. The company did provide the necessary equipment, including laptops, monitors, headsets, office chairs and additional equipment. Employees were also

provided with additional allowances to cover the costs of extra electricity bills and broadband connections (“*from last July additional electricity cash allowance*”; “*100 PLN for electricity bill*”; “*Claiming Internet Bills*”; “*Internet allowance*”). Nearly half of the respondents confirmed such support. The company also provided psychological support: “*ability to use a sick day for a mental health day if we need it*” (woman, 36–45, Miami Beach); “*constantly assist us both mentally and financially*” (woman, 31–35, Kolkata); “*encouraged planning days in such a way that there is chance to disconnect*” (woman, 31–35, Bangalore). One respondent (woman, 31–35, Goteborg) listed all the aspects of support provided by the company: “*They have done a lot of effort, from providing people with additional equipment, including power generators in India as a back up to organizing wellbeing classes and providing mental health support. We could publish a book on the efforts invested in supporting people in remote work during pandemic*”. Yet, a few also provided completely opposite responses, thus leading to extreme answers, i.e., “*no help*” and “*nothing*” all the way to “*everything*” and “*all they could*”.

Manager’s support was also very important for the team; support both in doing their jobs, but also on a purely personal level. Respondents were asked how often they interacted with the manager and whether they felt well connected. Over 80% stated they have frequent contact with the manager – six on a daily basis, while 24 connected several times a week. Only seven respondents referred to less frequent contact (once or 2–3 times a month).

Table1. Sense of a connection with the manager



Source: own study.

There was a consensus that the manager ensured they were comfortable in their remote work reality: “*flexible communication and work schedule*” (woman, 26–30, Nashik); “*virtual team event*” (woman, 36–45, Sidney); “*provided tools and framework*”

and equipment for working at home” (man, 31–35, Cracow); *“regular catch-up calls”* (man, 36–45, Cracow). It is quite difficult to organize workshops or team meetings during which participants feel part of one team despite being in different places. Yet, it is possible to create such opportunities which despite the physical distance will be a source of joint enjoyment. The respondents mentioned: *“We had an amazing year end paint party virtually, and she organizes team meetings – I feel like our team is very close”* (woman, 36–45, Miami Beach) and (she) *“organized team meetings where we would do something together, e.g., shipped paint and canvas to everyone and we would paint together during teams call”* (woman, 31–35, Goteborg). People also appreciated the personal help and support the manager provided and emphasized her readiness to listen and talk: *“(she) tries to help makes things easy for the whole team”* (man, 36–45, London); *“talked to me a lot”* (woman, 36–45, Cracow); *“always open to conversation, asking how I’m feeling, etc.”* (man, 36–45, Cracow); *“available whenever I need”* (woman, 36–45, Sidney) and ready to motivate: (she) *“always kept me motivated and was very approachable”* (woman, 26–30, Mumbai). The overall team experience is well articulated by a team member based in Miami Beach (woman, 36–45): *“I have never met my manager face to face, but I feel like I have known her forever. She is easy to communicate with and helps me with issues that may arise”*.

The hybrid work model, which provides for flexibility and lets the employee make decisions on exactly when to work and where, is greatly appreciated by the respondents. Respondents listed the following benefits of the current work situation: *“hybrid mode”* (woman, 31–35, Bangalore), *“flexibility of working at home”* (woman, 46 and older, Cracow) and *“some level of flexibility when needed to work from home”* (man, 31–35, Cracow). A clear majority of the team would like to continue to work partially from home in the future, once things go back to normal, i.e., would like to be able to work long a few days a week in the office and a few from home, on a longer term basis: *“possibility to work from home when we wish so* (woman, 26–30, Zurich); *“work from home twice a week”* (man, 31–35, Kolkata); *“getting to work from home 2 days a week”* (woman, 31–35, Mumbai), or to have the option to work remotely when needed *“option to WFH for personal reason”* (woman, 31–35, Singapore); *“I’d like to work from home, and also if I decide to travel with family, also work from there”* (woman, 36–45, Sidney). A few held the strong view that *“this is normal now, I do not see me going back to office”* (woman, 36–45, Cracow), *“I would like to continue working remotely and have the freedom to choose when I would want to be in office”* (man, 36–45, Mumbai) and *“flexibility to go to the office only when fits me or in case of team meetings – I really need to keep the hybrid setup”* (woman, 31–35, Cracow).

The second part of the study comprised an interview with the team manager, who has been with the company for 14 years. She has been working fully remotely since May 2021, and in the hybrid mode since 2016. She became the manager of the analyzed team a year and a half ago (November 2020). The manager was interviewed to gather

information on three aspects of the virtual work model: effective leadership, employee motivation, and on collaboration and creativity.

Managing people in a virtual environment has to be much more intentional and structured than in the normal face-to-face reality afforded by the office setting. The manager recognized that since the team is not physically together, interactions do not 'just happen' and it is her role to facilitate them (*"It is important to create a structure of meetings – from one on one to all team"*). It is also important to provide the team with structures and frameworks, in the form of processes and tools they can all use as a team. Insightful is the observation the manager made on the importance of such frameworks: *"The process and tooling structure must be nearly invisible with time – to form a platform on which we all work; it almost invisibly connects us to create a common understanding or culture of how things are to get done, and even a common language to communicate about how things should be done"*.

As part of the team, the manager recognized that the pandemic was a challenge that also simplified some team processes. She said: *"Oddly enough I think the pandemic made it easier for me to manage the team. The team from the start was a hybrid team, because people were located across the world. Each person has a local office. Yet, as a team we do not have a home location. Thus, it was already up to me to create that feeling of our team's virtual home office. [...] The pandemic deactivated the local offices and put everyone's focus on the virtual office, and this office thus had to attend to all their needs and requirements"*. The manager understood that the role once served by the local setting had to be served by her, and that the remote team had to attend to all the needs of the individuals on the team, also those related to psychological and emotional wellbeing.

While it may seem that people working remotely are a bit lost at sea and the organization and the team manager should provide a very well defined and thorough structure. The interviewed manager argued that though a structure is necessary, it needs to be kept to a minimum. (*"People need to have a clear understanding of what outcomes are expected – what is the purpose of the team, and need to be provided with tools, but the exact way that they deliver the outcomes should be up to them. This gives a sense of autonomy and motivation"*.) In this area, she also pointed out to a benefit of the virtual work environment: *"In a virtual space you also need to make your own connections and find your way of working not limited by a physical location, and – very importantly – take personal responsibility for creating a good work environment at home or wherever you work from"*. While initially people may feel a bit lost, she was certain that the team appreciated the flexibility of the remote model, as she herself did. (*"I think most enjoy the flexibility it gives, and the opportunity to work with so many different people, and to balance and blend their home life and work life"*.)

The manager stated that her situation was easier as a manager because she manages a team of experts with work experience. She is aware of other managers facing much

more challenging situations (*“I know some managers have had to struggle with new talent that needs heavy training, with people who are much more passive, and with complex home challenges. All can be overcome, but it is much harder than in the context of our team”*). This is how she describes her team and her situation as a manager: *“I fully realize I am a ‘lucky’ manager. My team is made up of experts, with experience, who are highly self-motivated, driven and ambitious. They need minimum motivation to do their job. Much of it comes from within. I also think all the people on my team have an excellent work ethic and self-drive. This makes it easy”*.

When asked about what she did to ensure the team is motivated and works collaboratively together, she again pointed out to her role more as an enabler and facilitator. Team members need to have a clear understanding of what their responsibility is and the value of their work for the organization. It helps them to see purpose and be engaged. (*“In addition to giving people autonomy in completing their tasks, which reaffirms my trust in them, I need to attend to them as individual human beings”*). While this is always true, it is especially critical during such a situation as the pandemic. Very tangibly, the local office is not open and during work people do not have access to other human beings and are not attended to or cared for as people; no one locally can really ‘check in’ how they are. The manager describes her responsibility in the following way: *“But in honestly, virtually the monitoring of wellbeing is done very simply – by keeping an engaged conversation going, at the level of one on and one to many across the entire team. I do this as much for the individual team members as for me – I also need the human interaction as my local office is closed”*. Local office was a place where people not only met their own manager face to face, but also each other; it happened naturally and organically, and can be related not just to work tasks but also to small talk between people. The manager is aware that this type of interaction needs also to be fostered, but it is more difficult. (*“One bit that is harder is to encourage one-on-one and one-to-many connections without me. This requires trust and closeness between team members. While I know they need to connect with each other without my mediation, they need to recognize this themselves. I cannot force it, but can nudge it by, for example, encouraging project work among different people or asking them to be responsible for longer term initiatives that require the input of others”*.)

Much research today covers the challenge of creativity – the need for it, as a driver of competitive advantage. And there is a concern that a setting in which everyone is alone, means less creativity and greater need for structured intervention to encourage it. The manager we interviewed has two insights on this. One related to the fact that creativity is dependent on people who are creative. Who a person is does not change whether he is working in an office or at home. (*“Regardless of whether you all work in one office, in a hybrid model, or fully remotely, people are who they are; if they are creative, that is great; if they are creative and open, then you are blessed. Even having*

a couple of such people can catalyze team creativity and a good work atmosphere for the entire team”). She also makes an observation how the pandemic has changed her approach in recruiting, in order to ensure the team has access to creativity. A team that has individuals who are open is necessary to drive healthy team behaviors, including creativity: “To think of it, I believe I am now hiring a bit differently since I have been working with teams that I need to set up as remote teams, and this aspect of openness – which helps them in coping while working remotely, and also encourages team work and team creativity, is something that I definitely look for more than I did earlier”. Interestingly, the manager also recognizes the need to set aside time to encourage creativity in the team, and that too much orchestration or instruction stifles it. (“the individuals on the team are highly creative, so I hardly need to do anything to encourage creativity. Usually when there is a joint project to do, they surprise me with unexpected creativity in how they solve the challenge of the project. It has been a big learning for me to be less instructional, and not to hover. Just to define what I need at the end and let them get on”). The manager also splits creativity into “productive creativity” which is engaged in by the individuals and the team in order to perform their jobs and complete their assigned tasks, and pure creativity that is part of the team bonding and enjoying working together. (“I try to also create space for creativity that helps them bond, relax, and feel good at work. I’ve done this by organizing fun activities. This is a challenge in the virtual space. This was much, much easier in the physical reality”).

The team manager has a role to play in maximizing the value of open people in the team, and also in encouraging collaboration. (“The best way to encourage anything in a team is to foster openness and trust [...] Of course, there are also ways to help foster it. Larger projects that require different skillsets to complete are a great way to encourage collaboration, and I try to set up such projects even just as team projects. My team is a team of experts, so there is a tendency for each one to get their head down and focus alone on the task at hand. So those larger team projects are a must”). Openness is only encouraged in an environment of trust. The manager clearly fosters this and recognizes its importance. (“I always ask my team for inputs when something is asked of me. It then takes longer to take the response back to the business, but it also means the team is not isolated from the higher business requirements and the purpose for which it was set up, and also sees clearly that their opinions are valued”).

The manager is supported by the larger organization. Just as the individuals we surveyed referred to help received as they worked remotely, from the employer, the manager was also supported. When it was clear that the team would not be able to meet face to face, the manager decided to organize something special for the team for the end of the year. (“Wanted for the team for a moment feel as if they were in the same space, not purely virtual”). With the support of the business leader who agreed for her to allocate budget to such an initiative, she organized packages to be sent to everyone’s home – with a cup and tea, a book, a funny hat with a winter theme, and

also a canvas and paint. A Norwegian artist agreed to facilitate a painting lesson for the team in a video conference. (*“The packages were stopped at customs, so I ended up moving the event from the original date as some people had not gotten the package. The whole endeavor was quite time-consuming and stressful, but also hugely rewarding”*). This is how she describes the virtual team meeting: *“For two hours it actually felt we were together. Everyone was such a great sport. All wore their Christmas head gear, had the tea next to them, and painted, and shared with the rest what they painted. The event, the positive emotions, felt very real, very tangible”*. Importantly, while the team and she felt the event gave them what they needed, it did not replace a physical meeting (*“Nevertheless I hope this year we do get to meet physically”*).

Conclusion

In the light of the above analysis, it is clear that the pandemic and forced remote work were perceived as a negative experience by the respondents, who faced problems with, for example, keeping their work life separate from their home life, or faced psychological fatigue. They felt an acute lack of interpersonal contact, reaffirming that each one of us is indeed a “social animal” [Aronson, 1972]. Yet, respondents also recognized many benefits of remote work. They were also thankful for the support received from their employer, both in keeping them well informed as well as in practical support they received when working from home. The team also valued the effort made by their manager to make them work together and feel as a team through open communication and emotional support. Such a supportive leadership style is especially important at a time that is highly stressful, during which people feel anxious and alone. The results of our research confirm that employees like and want to work in the hybrid work model. Yet, balancing remote and virtual work will continue to be an enormous challenge for the manager.

Based on the information gathered in the interview with the team manager, it is clear that in an expert team, while it is necessary to provide a framework of tooling and processes for the work to be completed, it is critical that the manager focuses on giving people a purpose and attending to them as individuals. This requires continuous communication, at the level of the individual, the team as a whole, and in various subgroups. The objective is for everyone to clearly see how their work is important and contributes to the purpose of the team. The individual must feel his work has a meaning. The manager has the power to make the team members feel valued as contributors to a larger whole, and must support them as individuals. In a remote setting, the manager must be especially focused on attending to psychological and emotional needs of the team members, as well as on maintaining open communication and encouraging collaboration.

Limitations and future directions of research

The qualitative and exploratory nature of the conducted research represents its key limitation. Despite the agreed technique which allowed the authors to better understand the challenges of teamwork and leadership during the pandemic, the research covered only one virtual team in an international organization with a workforce exceeding 300,000 employees. This may limit the applicability of the findings. However, the exploratory research was conducted in order to verify at a microscale how a given team and a given manager functioned within the remote work model. The research allowed to draw a number of conclusions. Future research could focus on several aspects of remote work. For example, it could look at the degree of difficulty and variety of problems or the impact of the pandemic with division into individual job roles (correlated by age, ethnical and cultural background, gender or personality type) which would require much larger-scale quantitative research. Given the fact that we remain amidst the pandemic, it is also difficult to fully estimate its long-term economic, social and behavioral impact, which could also be the subject of future research.

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CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF TEAMWORK AND TEAM MANAGEMENT FORCED BY COVID-19

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected organizations worldwide; both national and transnational companies have had to rethink their operations and way of working, often reorganizing and managing teams in a fully remote or hybrid mode. The article presents the results of a pilot study conducted on a geographically dispersed team of experts in a global

corporation, in order to observe any changes in teamwork and team management forced by COVID-19.

The objective of the study was to identify the most material changes COVID-19 instigated in team work as well as challenges and problems faced by a manager who had to manage a team amidst a crisis (pandemic). To this end, a literature review was conducted as well as an exploratory qualitative research, to investigate, at a microscale, how such a team and its manager coped with the remote work situation. The research was conducted between December 2021 and January 2022 on a purposefully selected sample population; the gathered data were the subject of content analysis. The results showed that despite numerous difficulties, what proved essential to the surveyed team's successful functioning within the remote work context, were supportive leadership, teamwork, good communication among the team members, and empathic and personalized interactions between the manager and the team members.

KEYWORDS: TEAMWORK, SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP, REMOTE / HYBRID WORK, COVID-19

JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: J21, M12, M54

ZMIANY W CHARAKTERZE PRACY ZESPOŁOWEJ I ZARZĄDZANIA ZESPOŁEM WYMUSZONE PRZEZ COVID-19

Streszczenie

Pandemia COVID-19 dotknęła organizacje na całym świecie; zarówno firmy krajowe, jak i ponadnarodowe musiały przemyśleć swoje działania i sposób pracy, często reorganizując i zarządzając zespołami w trybie całkowicie zdalnym lub hybrydowym. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania pilotażowego przeprowadzonego w rozproszonym geograficznie zespole ekspertów w globalnej korporacji, by zaobserwować zmiany w pracy zespołowej i zarządzaniu zespołem wymuszone przez pandemię COVID-19.

Celem przeprowadzonych badań była identyfikacja najważniejszych zmian wymuszonych przez COVID-19 w pracy zespołowej oraz wyzwania i problemy, z którymi musi zmierzyć się menedżer w zarządzaniu zespołem w warunkach kryzysu (pandemii). Aby zrealizować założony cel, przeprowadzono analizę literatury oraz zastosowano jakościowe badanie o charakterze eksploracyjnym, które miało na celu sprawdzenie w skali mikro, jak w sytuacji pracy zdalnej odnalazł się dany zespół i menedżer. Badania przeprowadzono na przełomie grudnia 2021 roku i stycznia 2022 roku. Dobór próby był celowy. Dane były analizowane za pomocą

analizy treści. Wyniki pokazały, że mimo wielu trudności, w badanym zespole ogromną rolę odgrywało przywództwo wspierające, praca zespołowa, dobra komunikacja pomiędzy członkami zespołu oraz empatyczne i indywidualne podejście do pracownika.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: PRACA ZESPOŁOWA, PRZYWÓDZTWO WSPIERAJĄCE, PRACA ZDALNA/HYBRYDOWA, COVID-19

KODY KLASYFIKACJI JEL: J21, M12, M54