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How has Covid-19 impacted virtual multicultural team management?

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Summary

Covid-19 has disrupted business, imposing modern styles of communication and collaboration. Governmental measures requiring employees to telework promoted new working practices. To understand how various stakeholders experienced this, we explored the impacts of Covid-19 upon multicultural virtual teams. We assessed how cross-cultural teams dealt with the pandemic, if the reactions were culturally dependent, the extent to which working practices were changed. We then explored the positive and negative aspects of these changes, the resilience factors, and any management lessons to be drawn from this time of crisis. Data collection was undertaken via semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight managers who lead multicultural teams, or virtual teams within a multicultural environment, and the data were then subjected to thematic analysis and coding. Findings suggest that participants' experiences of lockdown varied according to their cultural backgrounds, and that remote working often challenged group communication. However, several organizations and managers adapted well to the emerging environment, amending their communication styles to integrate remote teams, capitalizing upon the benefits of remote working, and purposely acquiring new skills to deal effectively with the challenges of lockdown.

■ **Keywords:** *intercultural management, intercultural communication, virtual teams, virtual teamwork, virtual teamwork leadership, virtual communication.*

Résumé

La Covid-19 a révolutionné le monde de l'entreprise en introduisant de nouveaux modes de communication et de collaboration. Les mesures gouvernementales imposant le télétravail aux salariés ont favorisé l'émergence de nouvelles pratiques de travail. Afin de comprendre comment les différentes parties prenantes ont vécu cette situation, nous avons étudié l'impact de la Covid-19 sur les équipes virtuelles multiculturelles. Nous avons évalué comment les équipes interculturelles ont fait face à la pandémie, si les réactions étaient liées à des facteurs culturels et dans quelle mesure les pratiques de travail ont été modifiées. Nous avons ensuite étudié les aspects positifs et négatifs de ces changements, les facteurs de résilience et les leçons de gestion à tirer de cette période de crise. Les données ont été collectées par le biais d'entretiens semi-structurés approfondis avec huit managers qui dirigent des équipes multiculturelles ou des équipes virtuelles dans un environnement multiculturel, et les données ont ensuite fait l'objet d'une analyse thématique et d'un codage. Les résultats suggèrent que les expériences de confinement des participants varient en fonction de leur environnement culturel et que le travail à distance pose souvent des problèmes de communication au sein du groupe. Cependant, un certain nombre d'organisations et de managers se sont bien adaptés à ce nouvel environnement, en modifiant leurs styles de communication pour intégrer les équipes à distance, en capitalisant sur les avantages du travail à distance et en acquérant délibérément de nouvelles compétences pour relever efficacement les défis du confinement.

■ **Mots-clés :** *gestion interculturelle, communication interculturelle, équipes virtuelles, travail en équipe virtuelle, leadership dans le travail en équipe virtuelle, communication virtuelle.*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have increased the number of multicultural and/or virtual teams, and the frequency of multicultural interactions (Batırlık, Gencer & Akkucuk, 2022 ; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). ICT created a common environment allowing individuals globally to interact in a common place – the virtual world – opening new ways of business collaboration. This has led companies to develop management and communication techniques to enhance their productivity, and to derive more benefits from these emerging types of teams.

The 2020-2021 Covid-19 crisis changed the organization of the business world, and the structures of companies and teams. The pandemic impacted 222 countries, which have managed this crisis interdependently, and intercultural differences have impacted on this crisis management (Bajaj *et al.*, 2021). Covid-19 crisis can be defined as a trans-cultural and transboundary “*crisis that effortlessly exceeds geographical, policy, cultural, public-private, and legal boundaries*” (Boin, 2018, p. 1). A transboundary crisis rapidly intensifies and continually evolves to combine the causes and consequences, wrongfooting national governments and making their existing crisis management mechanisms insufficient. To tackle the virus’s spread, many stringent governmental measures have been implemented, such as lockdowns and shifting from on-site to exclusively remote working. According to Endresen (2021, p. 5), Covid-19 “*will accelerate trends towards working from home past the immediate impacts of the pandemic*”, indeed this has prompted teams to be resilient so that projects can continue.

An earlier survey by Ernst and Young revealed only 20% of the 500 board members and chief executive officers (CEOs) surveyed believed their organizations were ready to respond to a significant adverse risk (McWilliams, 2020). Shortly after, the Covid-19 pandemic proved those fears well-founded, raising significant concerns about strategic human talent, as well as vulnerabilities in the world’s supply chains and financial resilience. The ongoing pandemic has been referred to as a “people-based crisis” (Strack *et al.*, 2020). Multinational corporations’ decision-makers have taken a variety of steps to reduce the pandemic’s effects – most often, whether at the

macro – or firm-levels, these actions involve rethinking boundaries and managing distance.

The difficulties of collaborating and leading from a distance have been well established in the field of international business, but that have gone unaddressed in management practices that have been made worse by a sudden change of environment (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore important to observe and describe all the changes brought by this sudden change on multicultural teams’ management and strive to understand what is positive and negative about it, the resilience factors of multicultural teams, and the management lessons that can be drawn from this time of crisis.

This research examines the impact of Covid-19 on virtual multicultural team management in a three-step framework: the cultural impacts of globalization upon teamwork, the challenges of multicultural teams, and the rise and specificities of virtual teams. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these themes has been examined based on the availability of data at the time of the current research. This research was conducted with a qualitative approach *via* in-depth semi-structured interviews that was involved the managers leading multicultural teams or virtual teams (n: 8) and working in a multicultural environment, as they had process expertise on managing international and distance teams and they have experienced how Covid-19 has affected their business practices (experiential expertise).

1. Literature review

1.1. *The cultural impacts of globalization upon teamwork*

Even though there is no single definition of the word globalization, today is the era of globalization and no one can escape it as we “*all live in one world*” (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015, p. 1). Consequently, Marquardt and Horvath (2001) describe the building of high-performance multicultural teams as one of the greatest challenges for organizations in the twenty-first century and as the only way to succeed in a globalized and digitalized environment. Globalization has made it possible to have more diversity in the business environment. One of the widely accepted consequences of globalization is the development of individual outlooks, behaviours and feelings that transcend local and national boundaries. Therefore, the impact of globalization has created the multicultural population at any sector with the diversity of religion, ethnic, and

nationality gathering in the business environment (Woodward, Scribes & Bean, 2008).

According to Lifeguard and Jenks (2015, p. 2) "*Work is no longer confined to a single geographical space*", it now requires people to travel, to interact with culturally different "others" in various time zones, to relocate to different areas or countries, and, not least, to conduct their activities in virtual teams and other online contexts. Managing diverse cultural profiles means knowing how to manage multiculturalism and being culturally aware of our differences. As Bradman (2021) emphasizes, multicultural teams and their intercultural cooperation need a prior investigation on the concept of culture, as it opens a multitude of definitions. Culture is defined as the personality of a given group, taking into consideration their assumptions, values, beliefs, norms, ideologies, and the structure of their political, social, economic, and religious institutions (Schaubhut, 2017 ; Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede (2011, p. 6) defines culture further as a "*collective programming*" of the mind that differentiates people in a group or class from other members as different norms come to face each other in the workplace. He observed that cultures (often national cultures) differ from each other due to their relative adherences to the following six major dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, short/long-term orientation and indulgence/restraint. Therefore, in a globalized world, individuals can develop multiple cultural identities and provide "*important guidance for individuals to develop a more flexible and adaptive way of dealing with emerging challenges in their career development*" (Guan *et al.*, 2020, p. 3). Also, multinational organizations need to adopt cultural intelligence as the "*ability to adapt effectively to a new cultural context*" (Thompson, 2016, p. 333) when needed. Sho, Kef and Erez (2008) emphasize that multicultural team members in international organizations are motivated to get past cultural differences and maintain good relationships with one another when they have a shared interest in achieving a team goal. This sense of affiliation with people of different orientations who work in the same international organization speaks to a person's sense of global identity.

Alternatively, it is important to recognize a connection between culture and communication that permits "*the possibility of ethnic or cultural marking in communicative behaviour*" while allowing for the situational context to be salient and where interlocutors construct (inter) cultures in situ together (Kecks, 2014, p. 5). Therefore, to minimize the

negative effects of personal diversity on team collaboration, companies should use cross-cultural communication and diversity awareness trainings to improve cultural intelligence and interest in collaborating with people from other countries.

1.2. *The challenges of multicultural teams*

Multicultural teams provide a diverse range of skills, and effective leadership makes it possible to take advantage of the varied backgrounds of the team members to enhance organizational performance. This is especially relevant to agile organizations, which can quickly adapt to changes in the industry or environment (Holbach, 2015). Effective multicultural team leadership enhances the achievements of agile organizations (Roberts & Beamish, 2017). According to Holbach (2015) the managers in an agile organization can guide a team without jeopardizing the team's cohesiveness across the board. Such managers, who must be simultaneously focused, driven, and people-oriented, must be open to continuous learning through experimental action and foster an open communication style that facilitates collaboration and sharing across cultural diversity of multicultural teams. In this regard, power and control, conflict management, and the successful achievement of desired results are a few of the challenges faced by multicultural teams (Corillids, Bücken & Beerlage, 2017).

Spencer-Oatley (2009) insists on regularly verifying the good understanding and encourages co-workers to ask for clarification, restatement, and confirmation to make it easier to detect and address "*potential misunderstandings*" at an early stage (p. 5). Therefore, to overcome the difficulties of collaborating with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, communication is crucial in managing a multicultural team. Indeed, as stated by Spencer-Oatley (2009, p. 2), 97% of leaders and 98% of team members identify communication as essential for leaders and communication is listed among the five key manager skills. In this context, the notion of intercultural communication within the team could be defined as exchanging knowledge and having a collaborative behaviour to consider specific needs of communication and information. However, according to Caligiuri *et al.* (2020), working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic and using virtual communication tools has reportedly made it difficult to maintain (and even more so to build) strong social ties and networks (Hansen & Lavas, 2004), realistic expectations of reliability (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006), and a team identity (Manasvi, Davison & Jonsen, 2006) for those who had not established strong working

relationships prior to the crisis. Consequently, it hinders effective communication and knowledge sharing, as well as a shared understanding of norms, objectives, and tasks (Folk, Monge & Hollingshead, 2005). This may create a failure to communicate and retain contextual information, which refers to the difficulties of remembering information about the contexts in which other team members have worked (Spencer-Oatley, 2009). Teams can also experience uneven distribution information, which jeopardizes team collaboration, and differences in the salience of information that highlights the team's issues to agree on what message or topic is the most important. Relative differences in the speed of access to information also endanger the transmission of information and interfere with everyone's contribution in synchronous chats. And the last problem is related to the difference in the interpretation of the meaning of silence. Therefore, to ensure a proper understanding between the co-workers, communication needs to be referred to as "the exchange of meaning." Indeed, the early model of communication "the message model" postulates that people encode and decode signals in the same way and that "any mismatch would be explained by different degrees of familiarities with the language code or interferences", as described by Spencer-Oatley (2009, p. 3).

Worldwide workers, who were already under stress from the health risk of Covid-19 pandemic, are now working from home. Consequently, many managers also had to adopt managing teams remotely for the first time, adding to this stressor. The difficulties of collaborating and leading from a distance have been well established in the field of international business, but that have gone unaddressed in management practices that have been made worse by a sudden change of environment (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020).

As stated by Caligiuri *et al.* (2020), during the Covid-19 pandemic, employees' home-working under lockdown are more likely to experience longer work hours and more work-life conflict because this shift was unannounced, lasted for a long time, and required entire households to stay indoors. The change was especially significant for employees who were previously globally mobile and suddenly had to work from home due to the pandemic. In that situation, the boundaries between work and family had to be quickly rearranged. In addition, another challenge that virtual teams have had to face regarding Covid-19 is its transculturality, since sense-making differs from one culture to another. Crisis managers and leaders were expected to

detect signals of an imminent crisis and to make sense of them to "anticipate how events the events would develop and how threatening these could be" (Bajaj *et al.*, 2021, p. 10). However, such signals were often inconsistent and contradictory. They came from all kinds of sources: some loud, some soft, some accurate and some widely off the mark (Boin *et al.*, 2016). And the way information was disclosed was also determined by culture: high-context cultures sent implicit messages, that required reading between the lines. This contrasted with low context cultures where the message was explicit and could be sent in more than one way. These differences contributed to the creation of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication and added ambiguity. Therefore, managers had to be made aware that messages from outside national borders were constructed within a cultural context and that decoding them requires cross-cultural intelligence, the absence of which could lead to misunderstanding of the message's intent or intensity (Bajaj *et al.*, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity for workers to be able to effectively collaborate across borders while working from home and remotely. It moved teamwork suddenly and broadly into the virtual world, large segments of the workforce now exclusively conducting group projects using virtual communication tools.

1.3. The rise and specificities of virtual teams

Having individuals of a same team geographically spread has become a common phenomenon, which it is possible to refer to as "virtual team." Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, telework was on the rise, although it was still marginal. According to a Euro-found survey (2020), fewer than one in twenty employees reported working in this way regularly in 2018, and less than one in ten occasionally. The survey explains that close to 40% of those currently working in the EU started teleworking full-time because of the pandemic. However, it seems important to note that telework was not used at the same frequency depending on the level of the employee. Allain-Dupré *et al.*, (2020) states that "74% of employees with tertiary qualifications worked from home, compared to 34% of those with secondary qualifications and 14% of those with primary education only".

So, working fully virtual is not a new phenomenon, however, teams around the world were suddenly forced to transition to a fully virtual environment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the Covid-19 crisis, 88% of organizations either encouraged or mandated that employees work from home, ac-

According to a survey of 800 global HR executives conducted in March 2020 (Arlington, 2020). Virtual team interactions are always assisted by some form of computer-mediated communication technology. Berry (2011) differentiates computer-mediated communication from traditional face-to-face communication in that it is asynchronous rather than synchronous, thereby changing work patterns and dynamics, decision-making processes, relationships between individuals, and understanding of work. If ICT is vital to virtual teamwork, other factors must be taken into consideration. According to Duran and Popescu (2014), virtual teams are made possible by understanding the impact of national culture and linguistic characteristics of members on the team. When it comes to the language, as stated by Lichy and Ramphort (2018, p. 10), English is the predominant language used for online communication across Europe. However, Stern (2007) prefers referring to it as "Globish", which is described as a minimalist subset of the English language of around 1500 high-frequency words, spoken by individuals whose native language is not English and who have learned the language in a professional context (Lichy & Ramphort, 2018, p. 4). Saltzman (2020) reports that a significant correlation was found between the overall emotional intelligence of the leader and the overall work engagement of the virtual team members. However, engagement becomes more difficult when leaders and their teams are separated. Darics (2017) describes virtual collaborations as only successful if the leader can resolve communication issues, adopt a positive interaction style, and facilitate a supportive work environment. So, the sudden shift to remote team management seems to have been perceived differently depending on whether the person is in a managerial position or not. In fact, managers and employees differed significantly in their experiences, with managers agreeing less that they can avoid long meetings, spend more time on the computer, and perceive their work as more demanding compared to employees. However, both managers and employees would like to see their colleagues more often (Kirchner *et al.*, 2021).

Rozhdestvenskaya *et al.*, (2020) give three criteria to assess the possibility of achievement of a task in remote work. The first one is "task interdependence" which highlights how much people rely on each other for information, material, and expertise. Then, there is "task complexity," which is about the structure, routine, ambiguity of the team. And finally, there is "task intellectiveness" which focuses on the extent to which the task has a clear and de-

monstrable answer. Kirchner *et al.* (2021) provides more insights related to the difficulties encountered by managers such as the partial digitalization of processes. They highlight the fact that not all tasks can be performed at home, and the organization of work and projects is being altered by the switch to remote work. Remote management and communication are also affected, due to the difficulty of knowing how teams feel, of getting the full attention of employees during meetings. Kirchner *et al.*, (2021, p. 11) notice that there has been an increase in the number of meetings per person (+12.9%) and the number of participants per meeting (+13.5%). In addition, daily interactions require additional adjustments to succeed in the virtual environment. Several types of have been categorized by Whillans *et al.*, (2021) as follow: The "task interactions" which include content interactions (answering questions, getting feedback), bounce-back interactions (building ideas in real time), or process interactions (defining and structuring work). Then, there are "relational interactions" (building relationships), which include for example social interactions. Finally, the last category ("other interactions") regroups the huddle interactions (checking norms, making sense of a meeting together), and the developmental interactions (formal feedback and development programs). Regarding content interactions, these are activities that occur spontaneously when individuals work in the same physical location. Due to telework, teams feel that they are missing information. Synchronous technology (Teams or Zoom meetings) can partially solve this issue, by allowing for immediate questions and better collaboration (Whillans *et al.*, 2021).

Regarding bounce-back interactions, it was noticed that teams generated ideas asynchronously. This facilitates more equitable conversations because "everyone's perspective has to be articulated as opposed to a free-flowing conversation" (Whillans *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). However, team members noticed that it was more difficult to align with the team. Also, since informational exchanges have disappeared in the virtual environment, teams had to find a way to adapt, e.g., some teams keep "chat time" to make those conversations less contrived, and some managers create time in the calendar for "side-ways feedback" (Whillans *et al.*, 2021, p. 5). In conclusion, leading a multicultural team is not only about learning a language or discovering a new culture. Studies have revealed that cross-cultural teams are increasingly prevalent, and that communication is an essential factor for a cohesive and successful team. Indeed, multicultural, and virtual

teams can offer a wide variety of skills, but they can also face challenges related to distance management, communication, and conflict management. Clear and effective communication, consistent management and proactive collaboration are key factors in overcoming these challenges. Cultural and linguistic understanding, as well as emotional intelligence, can have a significant impact on the success of these teams. Although collaboration in such teams is more challenging than in traditional teams, the benefits are numerous, such as better creativity and cultural intelligence.

2. Methodology

The intention of this paper is to produce findings that offer an insight into the impact of Covid-19 on cross-cultural and distance team management. This research was conducted with a qualitative

approach to observe and describe the impact of Covid-19 on cross-cultural team management. This method is used for understanding “a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, p.1-2). The target group is the managers leading multicultural teams or virtual teams. The data used for this study were collected by interviewing eight people working in a multicultural environment, as they had process expertise on managing international and distance teams and they have experienced how Covid-19 has affected their business practices (experiential expertise) and data saturation was reached. To achieve multivocality (Suthers, Lund, Rose, and Teplovs, 2013) and triangulation (Flick, 2004), priority was given to the

Table 1: Interviewees profiles

Manager	Age	Job	Team Size	Work location	Industry	Company size	Professional experience (years)	Interview duration
A	20-29	Purchasing coordinator	5	Marseille, France	Biotechnologies	SME (Small and Medium Enterprise)	3	1h30
B	50-59	Chief Marketing Officer	25	Lyon, France	Industrial equipment	SME	32	1h
C	30-39	Global Product Manager	30	Lille, France	Sport equipment	LE (Large Enterprise)	8	1h15
D	20-29	Account Manager	10	Quebec, Canada	Consulting and engineering services	LE	7	1h
E	40-49	Director IT Project	10	Saint Quentin Fallavier, France	Biotechnologies	LE	25	50 min
F	20-29	Team Lead Sales	12	Berlin, Germany	Air transport	SME	6	50 min
G	20-29	Managing Director	5	Pune, India	Import-Export	Micro-firm	2	1h15
H	30-39	Sales Manager	11	Valence, France	Beverage industry	SME	16	1h

Table 2: The data structure

1st order	2nd order	Aggregate
Evaluation of stressors Collectivistic and individualistic cultures	The experience of the pandemic depending on cultural background	Identification of problems encountered by teams due to the pandemic
Abrupt lockdown Working from home isolates people Motivation declines The role of the manager and the company	The brutal switch to remote work causing an overall loss of communication within the team	
The role of video conference tools Setting new processes The role of the manager and the company	How some companies have succeeded in federating team members together: Maintaining an effective communication and cohesion	
A gain in flexibility A more difficult cohesion Hybrid: the best compromise? The risk of extended working hours	The transition to remote work: the advantages observed, and the difficulties encountered	
Notable difference in meetings Creating new processes and habits The role of digital tools	Covid-19 has pushed teams to work differently and managers to adapt: a new communication style and a new organization	Resilience: the ability to adapt and create new habits and working methods
Setting meetings Slower progress of projects Information and Communication Technologies	Managing virtual team projects through Covid-19	
Adaptability Human relationships	Pandemic as a driver for skill gain	

diversity of profiles. A detailed description of the profiles interviewed is available in table 1 as follow: In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted following an ad-hoc guide. An outline of the questions was provided if requested by the interviewee. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research question. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. It is used to study specific subgroups and can be more efficient than random sampling (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Interviews of about one hour per person were scheduled to let the professionals express themselves freely and develop their ideas. Questions were asked, and rephrasing was done, if necessary, but the objective was to interrupt them as little as possible to let them develop their point of view to the maximum. The data were collected face to face during the interviews, then it was analysed based on themes according

to the Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013), which is a qualitative data analysis method with an inductive approach. The analysis (Table 2) commences with the elaboration of the first order codes, followed by the second order codes and finally the aggregate dimensions (link the interview transcripts with the literature review).

3. The Findings

Differences between the testimonies received and the state of the literature are analysed in the following paragraphs, following the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

3.1. *The experience of the pandemic depends on cultural background*

Guan *et al.* (2020) have shown that cultural differences play a role in the evaluation of stressors. Indeed, priority is given to different elements; in individualistic cultures, attention is focused on

personal elements (work, career opportunities), whereas in collectivist cultures, the group is given more priority. The pandemic can be identified as a major stressor; therefore, the interviews allowed us to compare their collaborators' reactions to the pandemic according to their cultural background. Most respondents had difficulty establishing a precise answer, either because the sample of people sharing the same culture was too small, or because differences between interviewees' reactions were minor. Nevertheless, some respondents were able to point out the differences they noticed. Manager H described their reactions as aligned with the reactions of the different governments, conforming to cultural norms:

"The Japanese, the Chinese, the Americans, and the Dubaiotes had radically different approaches because they were dictated by their governments." While Manager E categorized employees according to their reactions into three profiles that are:

"A first profile is extremely worried and concerned because the employee is terrorized. A second profile relativizes the impact of Covid-19 and its dangerousness while being careful. The third profile is not scared at all and that tells itself that this crisis is bound to pass. These three profiles appeared in the interviews whatever the culture of origin of the respondent, to a greater or lesser extent."

Manager A, who comes from two cultures, French and Egyptian, was able to make the link between the two countries by saying that:

"In Egypt, no one was completely confined because it was not possible not to see their family or see people. We all live together; we are very communal. So, there were no real lockdowns like in France, and my family was very worried about me. It was still stressful to be alone. The notion of socializing is especially important in Egypt."

From these testimonies, it is possible to deduce that the reaction (and the fear generated) at an individual level was the same everywhere. But the variations at a national level can be explained by the cultural background that influenced the understanding and the response to the pandemic, as we can see from the testimonies of managers A and H.

3.2. *The brutal switch to remote work causing an overall loss of communication within the team*

The interviews highlighted that the beginning of the shift to remote work seems to have been quite tu-

multuous for all the teams, as shown by the different testimonies received. Manager F pointed out that: *"In March 2020 it was a disaster, meaning that it was the first time that everyone was working remotely. We did not really know what to do, we learned on the job."*

The pandemic has also caused some employees to quit the company, an interviewee (Manager F) expressed that:

"The other impact of Covid-19 is that I lost two people in export who were confined to Belgium."

The manager is responsible for the deterioration of team members' motivation. Indeed, one interviewee expressed that:

"The person in charge at the time (...) cut the link with the teams and that was a lesson for us because there were many requests from his team who decided to leave when the markets reopened. The team was no longer engaged, and we had a loss of revenue."

Which reveals that management in periods of instability allows the team to emerge united and welded, or on the contrary to create fractures between the members.

In a virtual team, the level of emotional intelligence of the manager is a key factor in the overall work engagement of the team. Darics (2017) states, virtual collaboration can only work if the manager is able to understand and solve potential communication problems, and to adopt positive communication.

3.3. *How some companies have succeeded in bringing team members together: Maintaining effective communication and cohesion.*

Several interviewees reported that they were able to maintain good team cohesion and communication during the pandemic, which was due to several factors such as creating new processes and habits. Individuals mentioned that video conferencing tools helped them maintain strong relationships with their teams. They also used these tools to bring a more playful aspect to the professional sphere. Manager H reported that:

"We were able to maintain a very strong cohesion by doing a lot of video conferencing during lockdown. We would also do little sports challenges, for example "Bring Sally up Bring Sally down."

Another person stated that:

"They set goals until it became a habit, you had to talk to at least 5 people a week outside of your team to continue to build relationships."

This emphasizes that teams were aware of the need to reconnect people and that working relationships

could evolve by bringing people together, creating shared memories while respecting the regulations in place as explained by Kaushik and Guleria (2020). The role of the manager and the company also seems to have been incorporated into the cohesion work, as many of the interviewees who are team managers stated that they had worked to combat team isolation. Some people reported that:

“It is quite complicated to create cohesion among team members, but we have a daily “kick off” (...). As a manager, I often talk to my colleagues in an informal way, whether it is by having a coffee via Zoom, or by having personal conversations. For me, it is the manager who makes the difference and manages to connect the teams well.”

These testimonials can be connected to the concept of huddle interactions (Whillans *et al.*, 2021), which are informal exchanges that occur naturally when team members are in spontaneous meeting places. As reported by Whillans *et al.* (2021), some managers aware of the disappearance of these interactions, due to the shift to remote work, have instituted moments of informal exchange during meetings to federate members and encourage more fluid communication.

3.4. The transition to remote work: the advantages observed, and the difficulties encountered

The most known advantage of teleworking is the flexibility, whether in terms of working hours or location, or in taking care of small domestic tasks. Thus, shifting to teleworking has resulted in a better work-life balance, and the pandemic has brought the matter of time spent at work back into the discussion. A person managing a French and Indian team pointed out that:

“The best compromise for me is the hybrid format, I wouldn’t see myself staying in the office all week, but I wouldn’t see myself staying at home alone in front of a computer all week either.”

The fact that many people remain in the hybrid mode, even though the lockdowns are over, has pushed managers to practice more virtual leadership. The way in which managers have managed this transition has strongly influenced the quality of the team’s virtual collaboration. Managers had to adapt their communication style, as Darics (2017) points out, emotional intelligence has gained an important status among the factors playing a role in effective leadership.

The feedback regarding the hybrid mode differed according to the interviewees, Manager H noted that the on-site days were crucial to keep the teams united:

“It is extremely important for the teams to be at least 3 days a week in the office so that they feel committed. Otherwise, (...) you really lose commitment to the company, and that they asked their team to go back to working 100% on site so that communication would recirculate, and projects would move forward.”

This testimony is consistent with Saltman (2020), that engagement becomes more difficult when leaders and their teams are separated. Having teammates geographically separated requires the leader to develop new ways to stay connected with their colleagues, and to pay attention to the balance between control of the work done and acceptable autonomy. However, it seems important to point out that not every person struggled with the transition to telework. Some interviewees did not note any major difficulties related to the hybrid format, when asked if the Covid-19 changed the team cohesion, one interviewee responded that:

“No, it’s completely the same, it didn’t change anything, and it would have been the same if there was no Covid-19.”

Manager G mentioned the risk of extending working hours, with commuting time becoming working time: *“However, the fact of being teleworking has extended the time slots a little, because with the fact of always being at a distance, you think that after 5 p.m. you can continue to send a professional message. It is important not to turn the commuting time into a working time slot.”*

Time management is defined by Saltman (2020) as important to delineate the acceptable time slot for responding to these emails for example. What is more the findings of Defilippis *et al.*, (2020) revealed that the workday has expanded by +8.2%, or +48.5 minutes.

3.5. Covid-19 has pushed teams to work differently and managers to adapt: a new communication style and a new organization

The managers had adapted the way of organizing and structuring the meetings, during the interview they acknowledged that during virtual meetings “you have to listen to the other person more, and that requires waiting to intervene on the subject so as not to speak over someone else.”

Similarly, Manager B acknowledged that:

“Our meetings are more structured, less natural, they require a timing and an agenda.”

Also, several managers mentioned the growing importance of the calendar, as every meeting and call must now be planned in this calendar.

This is also what emerges from the study of Whillans *et al.* (2021), which explains that employees felt like they were missing information, due to the impossibility to spontaneously meet their colleagues and discuss something, and that they had to schedule a call. One way to tackle this issue was to use asynchronous technology, such as Slack or Teams, allowing teams to ask immediate questions and receive answers.

Manager D noticed positive and negative evolutions in the evolution of communication, as it was mostly done through a screen, they explain that:

“Indeed, we learn a lot from a person via non-verbal communication and in this case, it has been reduced to a computer screen where we see from head to shoulders, so we lose a big vector of communication. But on the other hand, we were in the personal environment of the people.”

This point was also highlighted by Defilippis *et al.*, (2020), that the lack of face-to-face communication was one of the top five problems experienced by teams when working remotely. The fact that body expression, apart from facial expression, was not considered made communication more difficult. However, Whillans *et al.* (2021) revealed that being in the person's personal space, instead of a stereotypical office, allowed one to get to know and connect with the other person better, resulting in more compassion and transparency between the two interlocutors. When being asked about the role of the digital tools in their future work life, the interviewees are unanimous: digital tools like Teams, Zoom or Slack have become a lifestyle, according to Manager B:

“We use video conferencing tools in a much more massive way, and we use digital tools for our customers as well.”

They feel that the pandemic has allowed companies to be more efficient and that *“that Covid has put us 10 years ahead in terms of digitalization”*. However, manager C points out that there is still room for improvement in the use of digital tools since companies are not adapted to the mixed use (on-site / remote) of digital tools, especially during project meetings.

3.6. Managing virtual team projects through Covid-19

Among all interviewees, only one said that Covid-19 did not impact their project management, saying that:

“We launched another project, ‘Wave 3’, where people never met and for which we did everything

remotely. We did everything through cameras and the collaborators came from all over the world, (...), and it worked well. In the end, Covid-19 did not slow down the delivery of IT projects so much because we did not need to put physical processes in place.”

This can mostly be explained by the fact that this person manages an IT team, spread over several continents, and is used to managing international projects.

All other participants saw a very visible change in their project management, with several people pointing out that projects were more complicated to manage remotely because of the geographical distance and the impossibility of meeting for an entire day with other project stakeholders, as they would normally do. Manager A stated that:

“Setting up the project was tedious because we were all working from home, we could not see each other, and someone was always missing. We did not spend the entire day together, it was an hour or two here, an hour or two there, because it is just not possible to spend an entire day on Webex.”

Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on project management, an interviewee confirms that projects take more time when everyone is working remotely, and that there are more small tasks to do daily:

“I find it much more difficult to make progress on substantive issues, due to the fact that I have to plan everything, I have more meetings, more emails, so I have to reserve more frequent time off.”

This statement echoes the findings of Kirchner *et al.* (2021), which states that the number of meetings per person has increased by 12.9% and the number of participants per meeting has risen by 13.5%. The work organization has also been complexified as more time is needed to organize work and coordinate projects.

3.7. Pandemic as a driver for skill gain

It was noteworthy to ask what qualities or skills the interviewees felt they gained during the pandemic. The answers differed according to the interviewees. Manager A thinks that they showed more emotional intelligence during the periods of remote work, which allowed them to better control their communication. In addition, manager F declared that they had gained the ability to filter the information they received from all sides. Indeed, the info-obesity that we suffered during the pandemic, had enabled them to learn to sort the information received and

they had been able to integrate this skill into their professional life:

“Filtering information does not mean ignoring it, but it means filtering the sources of information and deciding how much importance you give to a piece of information. Covid-19 has changed our endurance, stress resistance and stimulated creativity.”

Finally, Manager D expressed that the pandemic changed the way they interacted with their colleagues. During lockdown, their company had set a goal of talking to five people outside of her department, and this allowed them to have deeper relationships with the people they manage:

“Covid-19 taught us to build much more intentional relationships, in that I could not just turn around and help my recruiter if I heard there was something wrong. I had to trust him, and he had to feel comfortable telling me what worked and what did not.”

The evidence of how employees showed resilience during the Covid-19 period and have developed skills or qualities to overcome a challenge for managing workload *via* virtual team is out of scope of this study. It would require further study on how individuals overcome an obstacle such as the Covid-19 pandemic and what tools they put in place at a personal and organizational level to do so.

CONCLUSION

We assessed how cross-cultural teams dealt with the pandemic, if the reactions were culturally dependent, the extent to which working practices were changed, the positive and negative aspects of these changes, the resilience factors, and if there are management lessons to be drawn from these factors.

Before starting this research work, it was expected to see major effects of Covid-19 on multicultural teams and on distance and virtual teams, as for example the involvement of members and communication between teams, and the impact on their ability to perform their work. However, in terms sample chosen for this study, as these teams were already used to working remotely, therefore the pandemic did not affect and disturb their habits much.

However interesting conclusions were drawn on why some teams succeeded in staying united and bounded. This resilience was attributed to their ability to reinvent themselves and create new practices and habits, and to a different use of ICT. The involvement of the managers and their emotional intelligence also enabled them to federate the mem-

bers together. In addition, the pandemic allowed the teams to learn to be agile in creating a new communication and organization. Solutions also had to be invented to ensure that communication remained fluid and that all members had the same amount of information. Although communication seemed more artificial, working from home allowed the employees to enter a more private sphere of their collaborators. This transition to remote working has had beneficial effects and has challenged the teams, providing more flexibility and freedom, a better work-life balance, but at the same time it has been accompanied by a slower evolution of projects. Finally, some people were able to take advantage of the pandemic to gain skills and qualities, such as increased emotional intelligence, improved resilience, empathy, sociability, and openness to others, thus showing resilience in the face of the obstacles encountered because of the pandemic.

This study can be used by managers and human resources as a basis for understanding the factors that bind teams together and help them to overcome crises, such as the Covid-19 crisis. For future research, additional research would be worth exploring, such as interviewing an intercultural teacher and a distance management teacher who would bring their knowledge and expertise to the work and have more « theoretical » feedback, compared to the managers who were able to share their experiential expertise. Finally, there is a lack of research on the cultures of small countries or the subcultures of large countries, as most authors have worked on the assumption that there is only one culture per country studied. Indeed, theories of culture can serve as a framework for understanding a person's behaviour or cultural identity but are not necessarily sufficient.

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