

INFLUENCE OF SUSTAINABLE TEAM MANAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL TEAMS ON TEAMWORK PERFORMANCE

Olaf FLAK^{1*}, Barbara KOŻUSZNIK²

¹ Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce; olaf.flak@ujk.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-8815-1185

² University of Silesia in Katowice; barbara.kozusznik@us.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-0574-8742

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to present the solution to the research problem concerned the impact of sustainable virtual team management on the performance of such a team.

Design/methodology/approach: The research method used in the research was long-term non-participant observation using online managerial tools as research tools. The research involved 60 participants in 12 teams, working for 41 days on a complex organizing problem.

Findings: Two key conclusions were drawn from the research. First, the lack of a defined virtual team manager has little effect on the emergence of a balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance. Second, the balanced influence of virtual team members has very little effect on the fulfillment of the criteria for team performance.

Research limitations/implications: The findings prompt us to plan further research in the field of social influence in virtual teams and to find other dependencies of virtual teams' performance on psychophysical factors and work environment. Such research is designed and undertaken in the future by the authors of this publication.

Practical implications: The best evaluation of performance had the team with the highest coefficient of variation in %. The "hero manager" pattern was not confirmed.

Social implications: As the results varied, but it can be assumed that future research incorporating very rigorous experimental requirements will answer several questions. First, whether dispersion is universal to all teams or whether it is divided into different types, such as the complete absence of a manager. Second, or whether the delegation of leadership roles to each other by all participants increases the efficiency of work in a virtual team.

Originality/value: The system of organizational terms which is an original methodology for studying organizational reality. It is based on monitoring real managerial activities undertaken by the manager and team members in the organization.

Keywords: sustainable team management, virtual teams, teamwork performance, managerial work, virtual teams.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

As a result of research on the influence of people on others in an organization, two opposing approaches to the importance of social influence in achieving team or organization-wide performance have developed. On the one hand, the literature emphasizes the leading role of the team manager in achieving high team performance (Kets de Vries, 2008), and on the other hand, there are views on reducing the influence of the team manager in order to realize the full potential of team members (Kożusznik, 2018). From this point of view, a new approach is emerging, which can be called sustainable team management (Cizmaş et al., 2020), which is based on treating one's influence in the organization as a factor shaping effectiveness, rather than as an attribute of one's own importance and prestige (Kożusznik, 1996, 2014). The phenomenon is increasingly likely to occur due to the growing formation of virtual teams instead of traditional teams based on workplace cohesion (González-Anta et al., 2021).

Therefore, the research problem formulated in the study concerned the impact of sustainable management of a virtual team on the performance of such a team. Two research questions were formulated that stemmed from the research problem:

- RQ1: To what extent does the lack of a defined manager of a virtual team affect the emergence of a balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance?
- RQ2: To what extent does the balanced influence of virtual team members affect the fulfillment of the criteria for team performance?

The research method was long-term non-participant observation using online managerial tools as research tools. The study involved 60 participants in 12 distributed teams who worked on a given multimedia project for 42 days. Section 2 below describes the theoretical foundation of social influence in an organization, Section 3 presents the methodology of research. Section 4 contains the results of research, and Section 5 contains the conclusions of the research.

2. Theoretical foundation of social influence in an organization

2.1. Historical review of research on influence in organizations

The history of research on the problem of social influence begins in the 19th century with the study of suggestion (Allport, 1968). The term "suggestion" was proposed by Liebeault in 1866 and describes a group of phenomena that can be characterized in that an individual's behavior is identical to the one that another person wanted to induce.

Dominant and subordinate behavior were studied over the following decades. Binet (1900) examines the concept of suggestibility or susceptibility to suggestion and wishes to measure an individual's resistance to suggestion. As a result of his research, Moore (1921) found that there is a cognitive reconstruction of an individual's statements under the influence of social context. The research proved how much influence social processes have on perception.

In the following decade, Kurt Lewin and his students began the "era" of group dynamics in social psychology. For Lewin, the essence of the group was the interdependence of its members: each member of the group depends on all others - a field of influence is formed (Lewin, 1950).

Two other researchers - Deutsch and Gerard (1955) - distinguished normative social influence from informational social influence. By normative influence, they meant the tendency to conform to the influence of others, by informational influence - the tendency to accept information provided by others. The results of Asch's experiment can be interpreted in the category of informational influence in determining the length of a stretch, as well as normative influence when it comes to group solidarity, as confirmed by the studies of Thibaut and Strickland (1956), as well as Hovland and Janis (1959).

Cialdini (2003), showing the types, sources and importance of influence, says that influence is there to facilitate our decision-making. We succumb to influence in order not to take action, and most often we trust that someone knows something better and more than us.

Research on social influence in organizations over the decades has divided into two main streams. The first assumes the high importance of leadership qualities and power attributes in a manager's work, while the second conversely recognizes the influence of team members' participation in management and the role of sustainable organizational management.

2.2. Increasing influence of the manager on performance of team members

In the first research stream, which assumes the high importance of leadership qualities of team managers, basic group and intergroup processes, based on defining oneself as a member of a group, generate various supervisor-subordinate relationships that have implications in terms of how and what kind of influence managers exert (e.g., Bass, 2000; Chemers, 2001).

The earliest studies focused on managerial traits, and later studies focused on managerial behavior. These culminated in Fiedler's (1978) research, known as the interaction model. Subsequent research focused on leadership as a dynamic effect of transactions between leader and subordinates, and later on the transformational meaning of leadership (Bass, 2000; Hollander, 1985), which introduced a new view of the manager as change-oriented, proactive, and having a mission and vision. These studies did not yield satisfactory solutions, so the perspectives of social cognitive psychology and expectancy theory currently being adopted seem promising (Hogg, 2001; Pfeffer, 2015).

At this point, it is worth citing the three most important approaches, well-established in the social sciences, regarding the influence of the manager on the behavior of organizational members.

The first example of this approach is Fiedler's model (1979), which assumes that group effectiveness can only be predictable if the behavioral style of the manager and the manager's ability to control the situation are known in advance, and that leadership processes cannot be considered solely in psychological, personality or behavioral terms, since they reach deep into group structures and are themselves structural (Kożusznik et al., 2020).

Fiedler has shown that:

- if (a) the team manager has a good relationship with the group of subordinates, as measured by their level of acceptance of the manager using the Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) scale; (b) the manager has a lot of power, i.e. can punish or reward subordinates; (c) the task is well-defined, has clear goals, there are few ways to achieve the goal and perform the task, then it can be said that the team manager is in favorable conditions; in such conditions, Fiedler found negative correlations between high LPC, that is, in these situations the task-oriented leader performs best,
- under moderately favorable conditions, managers with high LPC perform best,
- under unfavorable conditions, task-oriented managers with low LPC perform best.

The second approach is that of Blake and Mouton (1969), which is based on a similar approach to Fiedler's theory and assumes that the ideal approach is one that is simultaneously people-oriented and production-oriented, but it does not provide clear evidence on whether this is psychologically possible.

The choice of the participation option, and thus the determination of how to accomplish a task (whether taking more group freedom or placing more emphasis on the importance of the person in charge of the team or organization), is largely determined by the individual manager's inclination to behave in a certain way - his preference for a leadership style. In this view, awareness of one's own limitations (the tendency to focus too much on the so-called "human side" or to focus too much on tasks) should be the basis of managerial decisions.

The basis of the management grid (developed by Blake and Mouton, 1969) is two dimensions: people orientation and goal orientation. The 9.9 style (a combination of people-orientation and goal-orientation) is the most appropriate course of action to achieve excellence. The basis of the 9.9 style is the assumption of synergistic groupthink, the emphasis on group problem solving, the assumption of flexibility and logical thinking, team innovation, the importance of team evaluations and the importance of criticism (Nussbaum, 2013). Using the research method described in Section 3, the authors conducted a study of management styles in 2022, which they included in previous publications (Flak, Pyszka, 2022).

A third approach describing a manager's influence on his team members may be Hersey and Blanchard's conclusion. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) began their analysis of leadership effectiveness by rejecting the notion that there is one ideal leadership style, since all the results of research on various dimensions show that satisfied groups can be led by individuals representing any style and leadership behavior.

In their study, they found that the more managers adapt their leadership style to meet the demands and needs of the situation and subordinates, the more effective they will be in achieving organizational and personal goals (Flak, Pyszka, 2022).

The concept under discussion distinguishes four basic leadership styles: persuading, participating, delegating, commanding. Effective managerial behavior is defined as behavior appropriate to the situation. The concept introduces a new variable - a key dimension of the environment - the maturity of subordinates, or their readiness to take on the tasks facing the group (Rożnowski, Fortuna, 2020).

Maturity, defined only in relation to the specific tasks facing the group, is the ability to set high but achievable goals (achievement motivation), the desire and ability to accept responsibility, and the education and experience of individual group members. The basic assumptions of the theory are as follows (Hersey, Blanchard, 1977).

In doing so, the literature identifies the following principles (Kozusznik, 2005):

- if maturity is low, the leader should exhibit behavior that is highly task-oriented and lowly relationship-oriented to help the group succeed and begin to learn (command),
- as the maturity level of subordinates increases, the leader should reduce task-oriented behavior and increase relationship-oriented behavior to help the group build competence (persuasion),
- as the maturity of subordinates increases, then the leader should reduce both task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors so that the group can develop self-confidence and self-reliance in its work (participation),
- if the group reaches maturity, then the leader can further reduce both task-oriented and relationship-oriented habits and possibly delegate tasks to the group and expect them to be achieved (delegation).

2.3. Decreasing influence of the manager on performance of team members

The second approach involves increasing the participation of team members in management and reducing the influence of managers on work outcomes. This way of thinking originated in the 1950s, when Lewin (1951) defined the work environment as the main determinant of the behavior of organizational members. The creation of rules related to the course of social interactions in the organization largely concerned the establishment of physical distance and physical space (Weisband, 2008).

From a psychological point of view, a person's spatial relations are determined not only by the boundaries of his body, but by a kind of map that includes zones of closer and further spatial fields (Hall, 1976; Weisband, 2008). Assigning an employee a work space in an organization leads to the employee treating this space in a more personal way (Rożnowski, 2020).

The use of people's abilities and capabilities depends on two elements. On the one hand, these are the qualities and characteristics of people themselves, and on the other hand, the external circumstances in which they live. Both elements determine the “full realization of human potential” (Le Blanc et al., 2017).

In order to perpetuate this principle, it is good to be guided by a concept called interactionism, present in psychology, among others. Interactionism assumes the aforementioned dual conditioning: the interaction between the person (subject) and the circumstances. This simply means that even the best of a person's equipment, inner abilities and dexterity will not be fully utilized if they are not accompanied by certain conditions outside, in the environment, such as having the means or tools with which someone can make use of them (Pfeffer, 2015).

The concept of de-influence is based on treating one's own influence in the organization as a factor shaping effectiveness, rather than as an attribute of one's own importance and prestige (Kożusznik, 2005). It is based on rational de-influence, with full acceptance and awareness of the importance of the influence of all elements of the team, as well as multiple sources:

- the natural game of influence within the team, and the assumption that conformity and the search for independence are equivalent mechanisms (Hollander, 1985; Pratkanis, 2007),
- the idea of interactivity, from which it follows that exerting influence is not possible without the right space; even the best-equipped employee with his or her own qualities, skills and competencies will not be effective in an organization unless special external conditions are provided (Paliga et al., 2020),
- research results showing that the act of influence changes not only the behavior of those who are the addressees of the influence, but also the values and attitudes of the influencers (Haslam et al., 2011),
- researchers' doubts about whether managers can actually flexibly change the means of influence they use depending on the demands of the situation (Schein, 1988),
- the assumption that individuals can consciously control their behavior (Latham, 2012).

Therefore, the authors decided to conduct research in virtual, task-oriented teams, whose management rules were based on the above assumptions.

3. Methodology of research

One of the difficulties of studying organizational reality, including the actions of managers and team members in an organization, is to get to the facts of teamwork. Therefore, the authors developed an original methodology for studying organizational reality, which is based on

monitoring real managerial activities undertaken by the manager and team members in the organization (Flak, 2018; Yang et al., 2018; Flak et al., 2023).

The study used non-participatory observation as a research method, in which observation participants used online managerial tools. At this point, it is necessary to present how these tools work and their methodological basis.

The methodological basis of the study conducted is the system of organizational terms, which is an original concept for studying organizational reality (Flak, 2018). In the system of organizational terms, a manager's action is represented by a combination of "event" (derived organizational term) and "thing" (primary organizational term) (Flak, 2022). The event or thing is denoted by the symbols n.m, where n denotes the number of the event or thing, and m denotes its successive version. An example of the layout of various managerial actions is illustrated in Figure 1.

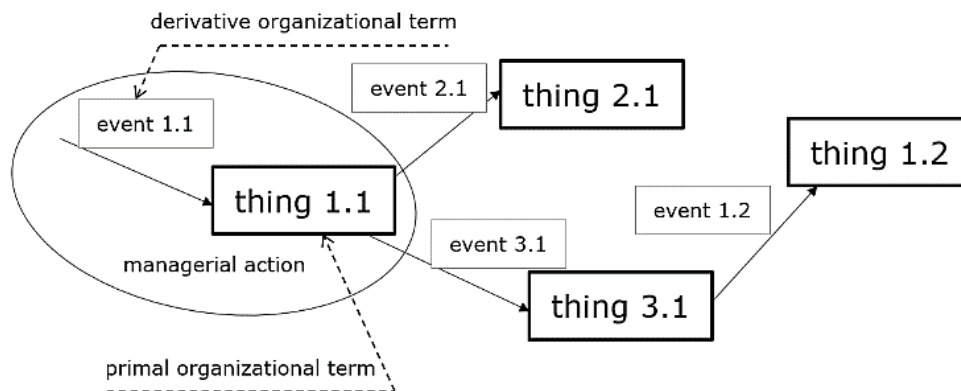


Figure 1. Example structure of managerial activities.

Source: (Flak, 2022).

Based on the system of organizational terms, 10 managerial tools were designed and implemented, the function of which is also to record the parameters of 10 managerial actions during their use. In this way, online managerial tools function as research tools (Flak, 2021). The tools are available on the research platform TransistorsHead.com at: <http://transistorshead.com/>

Since the research was conducted in virtual teams working in online management tools, it is necessary to define a virtual team and an online management tool. A virtual team is "a group of people with complementary competencies performing simultaneous, joint work processes through electronic media, regardless of geographic location" (Chinowsky, Rojas, 2003). An online managerial tool, on the other hand, is a simple or complex instrument for performing the work of a manager, which has a virtual form (e.g., in the form of an IT program or databases in computer memory) (Flak, 2017).

4. Results of research

The long-term observation was conducted from December 18, 2023 to January 29, 2024 among the students of management faculty of Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Poland. The study involved 60 participants in 12 virtual teams. Every team consisted of 4-6 members. What is important, in teams there were no defined team managers, all the team members could take managerial actions and use all online management tools. The only moment when a temporary team manager was appointed was at the very beginning of setting all the teams in the TransistorsHead.com platform (his role was to add all other members to the team and it came only from functions of the platform). After this moment all team members were equal and had the same social influence on the teamwork.

Participants in the long-term observation were given the task of preparing documentation of the program project on the YT channel in the Talent Show format. The task of the participants was as follows: formulate an organizing problem and solve this problem - propose a detailed format for the program and preparations for its implementation. The result of the study participants' work was a pdf document containing a detailed description of the solution to the organizing problem. The assessment parameters of the task completion were: (a) detail, (b) completeness and (c) originality. Participants used the online management tools implemented in the TransistorsHead.com platform, including 10 online management tools, described in the Section 3.

The first research question posed in the study was RQ1: To what extent does the absence of a defined virtual team manager affect the emergence of a balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance? To answer it, the number of managerial actions undertaken (counting all 10 measured managerial actions in total) by individual virtual team members was measured. Basic statistical measures were then calculated to assess the degree of balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance. Table 1 shows the number of managerial actions taken by members of each virtual team (some teams had 4, 5 or 6 people), and Table 2 shows statistical measures on their work.

Table 1.

Number of managerial actions taken by team members

virtual team	member 1	member 2	member 3	member 4	member 5	member 6
1	2669	661	968	448	710	-
2	1327	1117	872	929	414	559
3	1044	1166	1644	711	165	163
4	1152	857	893	718	672	-
5	959	458	308	598	426	-
6	1190	270	380	943	683	390
7	1653	1249	927	1289	1380	-
8	1317	527	209	180	582	-
9	830	401	203	258	-	-

Cont. table 1.

10	1124	1889	1115	845	-	-
11	1087	644	639	227	561	-
12	1354	789	302	291	-	-

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2.

Statistical measures on the work of virtual teams based on the number of managerial actions taken

virtual team	managerial actions in total	Arithmetic mean	standard deviation	gap (max-min)	coefficient of variation in %
1	5456	1091,20	806,07	2221	73,87
2	5218	869,67	310,38	913	35,69
3	4893	815,50	535,62	1481	65,68
4	4292	858,40	168,44	480	19,62
5	2749	549,80	224,49	651	40,83
6	3856	642,67	332,44	920	51,73
7	6498	1299,60	233,61	726	17,98
8	2815	563,00	410,41	1137	72,90
9	1692	423,00	245,84	627	58,12
10	4973	1243,25	389,32	1044	31,31
11	3158	631,60	274,33	860	43,43
12	2736	684,00	435,98	1063	63,74

Source: own elaboration.

As can be read from Table 1, the number of managerial actions taken varied among team members. In some of the teams, one person dominated, for example, in team 1 person member 1, and in team 10 person member 2. In contrast, management in team 7 was very balanced - team members undertook a similar number of managerial actions.

The statistical measures presented in Table 2, particularly the coefficient of variation in % (the higher the value, the greater the variation in influence on workflow), show how the teams participating in the study varied in terms of team members' influence on workflow. On the one hand, there were teams with a low balance of team management and thus the dominance of one person (e.g. team 1, team 3, team 8). On the other hand, it is possible to identify teams and a high balance of team management and, consequently, a similar influence of team members on the course of the team - team 4 and team 7.

Answering research question RQ1, it can be concluded that the lack of a defined virtual team manager has little effect on the appearance of balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance.

The second research question is RQ2: To what extent does the balanced influence of virtual team members affect the fulfillment of the criteria set for team performance? To answer it, we evaluated the effects of virtual teams according to the criteria that were set for them at the beginning of the study. These were the following criteria for solving the organizing problem, presented to us as a pdf file: (a) detail (whether the solution to the organizing problem was detailed), (b) completeness (whether the organizing problem was solved completely) was and (c) originality (whether the solution to the organizing problem was original).

Table 3 shows the results of the evaluation of the effect of the teams' work on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - the least fulfilled criterion, 5 - the most fulfilled criterion) and a comparison of these evaluations with the coefficient of variation in %. Figure 2 shows the distribution of coefficient of variation in % of individual virtual teams and total teamwork assessment. Based on the data in Table 3, Pearson's correlation coefficient was also calculated, which in this case was 0,3773 for the trend line function, which is a fourth-degree polynomial. Increasing the degree of the polynomial does not produce any apparent improvement in the correlation coefficient. Therefore, it can be concluded that the balanced influence of virtual team members has very little effect on meeting the criteria for team performance.

Table 3.

Team effect scores and coefficient of variation in %

virtual team	criteria: detail	criteria: completeness	criteria: originality	total teamwork assessment (average of detail, completeness and originality)	coefficient of variation in %
5	5	5	4	4,67	40,83
7	4,5	4,5	5	4,67	17,98
10	4	4	4,5	4,17	31,31
12	4,5	4	4	4,17	63,74
2	4,5	4	3,5	4	35,69
9	4,5	4	3,5	4	58,12
3	4	4	3,5	3,83	65,68
1	3,5	3,5	4	3,67	73,87
4	3	4	4	3,67	19,62
6	3	3,5	3	3,17	51,73
8	3	3	3	3	72,9
11	2,5	3	3	2,83	43,43

Source: own elaboration.

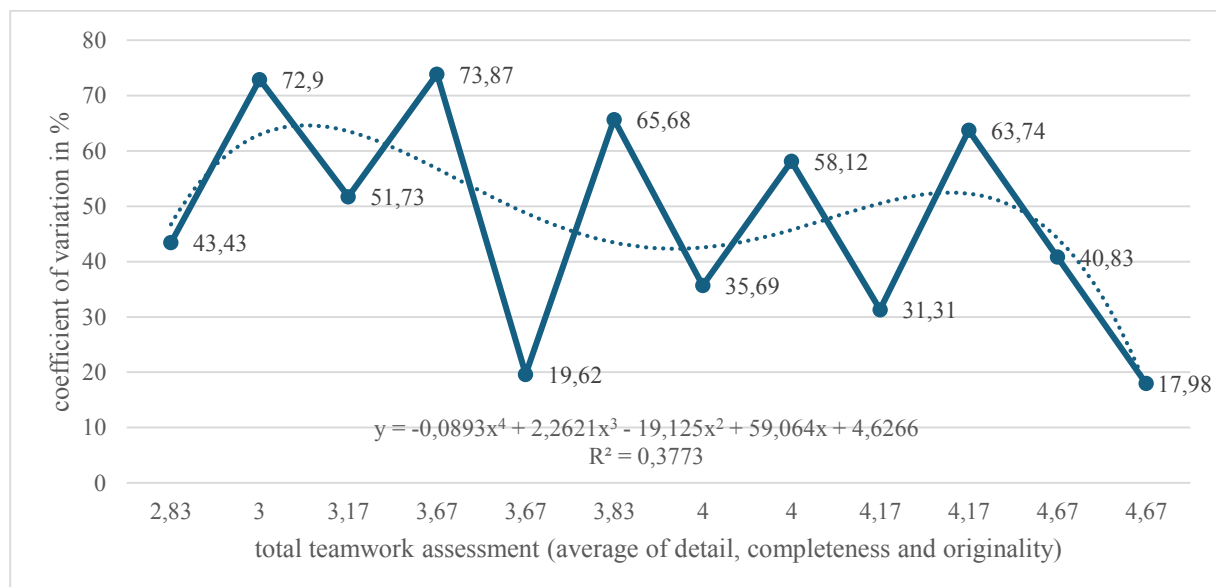


Figure 1. Distribution of coefficient of variation in % of individual virtual teams and total teamwork assessment.

Source: own elaboration.

5. Results of research

The research carried out using the method of long-term non-participant observation allowed to answer two research questions, related to the research problem, what was the impact of sustainable management of a virtual team on the performance of such a team. Answers to two research questions were obtained. First, the lack of a defined virtual team manager has little effect on the emergence of balanced influence of team members on the course of the team's performance. Second, the balanced influence of virtual team members has very little effect on the fulfillment of the criteria for the team's performance.

The results of the study do not link the activity of the manager to effectiveness, as if one would expect, especially since the best evaluation of performance had the team with the highest coefficient of variation in %. The "hero manager" pattern was not confirmed, as the results varied, but it can be assumed that future research incorporating very rigorous experimental requirements will answer several questions. First, whether dispersion is universal to all teams or whether it is divided into different types, such as the complete absence of a manager. Second, or whether the delegation of leadership roles to each other by all participants increases the efficiency of work in a virtual team.

The above questions prompt us to plan further research in the field of social influence in virtual teams and to find other dependencies of virtual teams' performance on psychophysical factors and work environment. Such research is designed and undertaken in the future by the authors of this publication.

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