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INVISIBLE WORK IN COMPLEX PROJECT TEAMS: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Purpose: This article aims to identify, understand, and conceptualize the role of invisible work in complex project teams operating under conditions of internationalization, remote work, and interdisciplinarity. It shows that effective collaboration in such settings depends not only on formal structures and procedures but also on informal and often unrecognized practices performed by key project actors.
Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach based on four years of empirical material from the Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial Project Management (EIPM) program implemented within the 4EU+ alliance. The analysis draws on three in-depth testimonies from key participants, supplemented with project documentation, allowing the reconstruction of practices absent from formal project descriptions.
Findings: The analysis identifies three interrelated dimensions of invisible work: (1) emotional work stabilizing teams by regulating uncertainty and mitigating conflict; (2) relational work building micro-connections across cultural and digital boundaries; and (3) institutional work enabling navigation across misaligned organizational logics, academic calendars, and administrative requirements. Together, these practices form a hidden infrastructure that sustains collaboration despite distance, diversity, and ambiguity.
Research limitations/implications: The study relies on a single case and a limited number of testimonies, which limits generalizability. Future research could include comparative, cross-institutional, or mixed-method studies to further develop the concept of invisible work.
Practical implications: The findings highlight the need to formally recognize invisible work as a key resource in managing international academic initiatives and to support the emotional, relational, and institutional competences of tutors, student advisors, and program coordinators.
Social implications: By shedding light on invisible work, the study contributes to a better understanding of the emotional demands placed on individuals sustaining collaboration in complex educational environments and points to potential improvements in their well-being and in students' learning experiences.
Originality/value: The article contributes to the management learning and project team literature by conceptualizing invisible work as a central element of complex educational projects and offering a new perspective on managing collaboration in higher education.

Keywords: Invisible work; complex project teams; international and remote collaboration; interdisciplinary education; project management.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Contemporary project teams increasingly operate in environments characterized by high levels of complexity: they are international, work remotely, and involve students and practitioners representing diverse academic disciplines and cultures (Adler, 2002; Earley, Gibson, 2002). Such configurations-typical of European initiatives, such as the 4EU+ university alliances-create a learning-rich environment while simultaneously generating a range of challenges related to cultural differences, lack of shared context, and digital communication constraints. These teams function at the intersection of multiple institutional logics, languages, work styles, and expectations, resulting in daily practices that diverge significantly from classical models of team collaboration (Stahl et al., 2010).

The existing literature on multicultural, virtual, and interdisciplinary teams has primarily focused on the visible aspects of work organization: structures, tasks, communication tools, conflicts, and role distribution (Gibson, Gibbs, 2006; Gilson et al., 2015; Rhoten, Parker, 2004). Far less attention has been given to those activities that are not formally embedded in project frameworks, do not appear in reports or schedules, yet are essential for enabling collaboration. In work with student teams, particularly in inter-university contexts, a substantial portion of the actions that maintain information flow, regulate emotions, mitigate minor tensions, build trust, or reconcile differing institutional requirements remains invisible and difficult to capture. In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as invisible work-effort that sustains the system but is not formally recognized as work (Hochschild, 1983; Star, Strauss, 1999; Hatton, 2017).

In educational projects such as the 4EU+ Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial Project Management (EIPM) program, the extent of invisible work becomes particularly evident when examined from the perspective of three key roles: tutors, student advisors, and program coordinators. Each of these roles contributes distinct forms of effort, responsibilities, and practical knowledge. Tutors engage in substantial emotional and relational work, assisting teams in managing tensions, interpreting silences, building micro-connections among students, and mediating misunderstandings, activities consistent with prior research on emotional and relational labor in educational and project-based contexts (Hochschild, 1983; Boler, 1999; Cunliffe, Hibbert, 2016). Student advisors support the learning process, motivation, and wellbeing of participants, performing subtle mentoring work that remains largely invisible within formal project structures (Hibbert et al., 2014). Program coordinators carry out intensive and often unremarkable institutional work, including negotiating differences in academic calendars, aligning business partner requirements, and translating divergent operational logics

between universities, forms of institutional and coordinative labor highlighted in prior research on inter-organizational collaboration (Oliver, 1991; Lawrence, Suddaby, 2006).

As a result, a complex network of practices emerges which, although rarely articulated or formalized, underpins the functioning of the entire system. The aim of this article is to reveal, understand, and conceptualize the invisible work conducted within highly complex educational projects. To achieve this aim, the study addresses two research questions: (1) how invisible work emerges and is enacted in highly complex educational projects such as the EIPM program, and (2) how this invisible work functions as a "hidden infrastructure" that enables collaboration across cultural, communicational, and institutional boundaries (Star, Strauss, 1999; Edmondson, Harvey, 2018). Based on a case study of the EIPM program, the analysis demonstrates that invisible work plays a critical infrastructural role in sustaining collaboration under conditions of internationality, virtuality, and interdisciplinarity.

By introducing this concept into the analysis of educational practices, the article provides a novel theoretical perspective on project team dynamics and highlights that the effective management of international, remote, and interdisciplinary teams requires the recognition and appreciation of work that is typically unseen (Ashcraft, 2018; Ashcraft, Mumby, 2021).

2. Invisible work and high-complexity teams

The concept of invisible work holds an established position within the social sciences and refers to forms of activity that sustain the functioning of social and organizational systems while remaining outside formal role descriptions and structures. A classical reference point is Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, which demonstrated that the regulation of one's own and others' emotions constitutes an integral, albeit often unacknowledged, component of work particularly in educational and caregiving professions. Similarly, Star and Strauss (1999) highlighted the wide spectrum of background activities performed informally and without institutional recognition, despite their crucial significance for organizational functioning.

Contemporary research extends these insights by emphasizing the invisible nature of work in digital, educational, and project-based contexts. In the literature on digital labor, scholars stress the structural invisibility of efforts associated with platform maintenance, content moderation, and coordination of distributed work (Gray, Suri, 2019). In education, research indicates that the emotional and relational work performed by teachers, tutors, and mentors forms the foundation of the learning process, although it is rarely formally acknowledged (Boler, 1999; Cunliffe, Hibbert, 2016; Hibbert et al., 2014). Likewise, coordination of academic projects, especially in inter-institutional settings, requires numerous organizational and mediating activities that are not reflected in official evaluations of work (Lewis, Russell, 2011).

A parallel body of literature on international and cross-cultural teams emphasizes that collaboration in such configurations generates both innovative potential and increased risk of misunderstandings and conflict (Adler, 2002; Earley, Gibson, 2002). Studies on cultural differences (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 1998) show that culture influences not only individual behavior but also expectations regarding communication, leadership, and decision-making. Meta-analyses indicate that particularly problematic are differences in trust-building and uncertainty management (Stahl et al., 2010). Work involving "cultural translation" and the creation of a temporary shared operational language is crucial in these teams, yet typically remains invisible.

Remote and hybrid teams also provide a significant context for analyzing invisible work. Research demonstrates that virtuality weakens social signals, complicates the interpretation of intentions and emotions, and increases the risk of misreading silence and limited engagement (Byron, 2008; Gibson, Gibbs, 2006; Mortensen, Neeley, 2012). Phenomena such as silent disengagement require intensive emotional and regulatory work by those in tutoring and coordinating roles, even though such effort is rarely formally captured (Ferrazzi, 2020). Studies further highlight a diminished capacity for affective attunement in digital environments, which further elevates the importance of relational invisible work (Koehne et al., 2012).

The literature on interdisciplinary teams, in turn, emphasizes epistemological tensions and the necessity of intensive translational work across different knowledge domains, methods, and quality assessment criteria (Repko, 2012; Rhoten, Parker, 2004). A central process becomes boundary work, or the negotiation of disciplinary boundaries (Gieryn, 1983), which demands both cognitive and relational effort. A substantial portion of this work remains invisible, particularly in student teams, where differences in competence and educational background further increase the complexity of collaboration.

Despite the wealth of research on international, remote, and interdisciplinary teams, as well as on emotional and relational labor, existing approaches remain fragmented and are rarely integrated in analyses of high-complexity educational projects. There is a lack of studies that treat invisible work as a central mechanism sustaining collaboration in environments combining cultural, communicational, epistemic, and institutional differences. Projects implemented within inter-university European alliances, such as 4EU+, remain particularly underexplored, where divergent academic calendars, administrative structures, and institutional logics generate specific forms of invisible work.

This article addresses this gap by analyzing invisible work as the hidden infrastructure of collaboration in complex educational projects. The case study of the 4EU+ EIPM program captures the scale, diversity, and significance of this work from the perspectives of three roles-tutor, student advisor, and program coordinator, and proposes a more integrated theoretical framework for research on collaboration in high-complexity educational environments.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach, premised on the assumption that understanding complex organizational phenomena requires insight into participants' experiences and an analysis of practices embedded in real-world contexts of action (Alvesson, Kärreman, 2011; Cunliffe, 2016). The empirical material was collected over a four-year implementation period of the 4EU+ Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial Project Management (EIPM) program and comprises three extensive testimonies from individuals occupying key project roles: an inter-university program coordinator, a tutor working directly with student teams, and a student advisor responsible for individual and instructional support.

These testimonies can be understood as a form of practical narratives-reflective accounts of experiences that reveal everyday practices and micro-interventions that are not captured in quantitative data or formal reports (Clandinin, Connelly, 2000). Each of the three perspectives contributes a distinct dimension of practical knowledge: coordinative, relational-instructional, and emotional-supportive, allowing for a multidimensional representation of invisible work and its functions within complex project teams.

The collected material was further enriched with supplementary sources, including field notes from team observations, records of project correspondence, program documentation, and reflections produced during weekly tutoring meetings. Triangulation of these data enables the capture of both declared and emergent processes, those that manifest in action but are often not articulated explicitly by participants (Denzin, 2012). The analysis was conducted within the tradition of interpretive qualitative analysis, integrating a hermeneutic approach with a practice-oriented perspective (Schatzki, 2005).

In the first stage, open coding of narratives was performed to identify recurring themes related to emotional, relational, and institutional work. In the second stage, thematic coding focused on mechanisms sustaining collaboration and on the micro-practices of invisible work. The analytical process was iterative, consistent with a reflexive approach in organizational research (Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2018), meaning that interpretations were repeatedly cross-checked against the empirical material and validated in light of theoretical frameworks concerning invisible work, complex teams, and emotional labor.

This methodology is particularly suitable for the study's objectives, as invisible work is inherently difficult to observe externally, and its analysis requires access to the experiences of individuals performing different roles within the same process. The multi-perspective design of the empirical material allows for the revelation of how different types of effort-emotional, relational, and institutional-interweave in daily practices, constituting the hidden infrastructure of collaboration in complex educational projects.

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings by examining how invisible work operates within the EIPM program. Rather than focusing on the chronological description of the project, the analysis concentrates on forms of work that remain largely unrecognized but are essential for sustaining collaboration in international, interdisciplinary, and predominantly remote teams. Three interrelated dimensions of invisible work emerged from the analysis: relational work, emotional work, and coordinative (institutional) work. These forms of work are primarily performed by tutors and program coordinators and function as a hidden infrastructure enabling the project to operate effectively.

4.1. Invisible Work as the Hidden Infrastructure of the EIPM Program

The Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial Project Management (EIPM) program, implemented within the 4EU+ European university alliance, provides the empirical setting for the study. The program engages doctoral and master's graduates from different disciplines in a seven-month project-based learning process focused on solving real challenges proposed by business partners. Participants work in international, multicultural, and interdisciplinary teams and collaborate mainly remotely, with two intensive on-site bootcamps marking the beginning and end of the program.

While the formal structure of the program defines the learning objectives, project milestones, and evaluation procedures, the empirical material shows that the functioning of teams depends heavily on a range of informal practices that are not formally assigned or recognized. These practices include mediating misunderstandings, maintaining motivation, translating institutional expectations, and coordinating activities across institutional and cultural boundaries. Together, they form a layer of invisible work that enables the formal project structure to function.

4.2. Relational Work: Building and Maintaining Collaboration

One of the most visible forms of invisible work concerns the continuous effort to build and maintain relationships within multicultural teams. Participants come from different disciplinary backgrounds, national cultures, and institutional contexts, which often leads to divergent expectations regarding communication styles, work pace, and problem-solving approaches.

In this context, tutors perform significant relational work by facilitating communication and helping participants establish shared norms of collaboration. This includes clarifying misunderstandings, encouraging quieter participants to contribute, and helping teams negotiate roles and responsibilities. Much of this work takes place outside formal meetings through informal conversations, additional consultations, or individual messages. Although crucial for team cohesion, these activities remain largely unrecorded in the formal structure of the program.

Relational work is particularly important during the early stages of collaboration, when participants transition from individual engagement to functioning as a team. During the initial bootcamp, tutors and coordinators invest considerable effort in supporting this transition by fostering trust, encouraging open communication, and helping participants navigate cultural and disciplinary differences.

4.3. Emotional Work: Regulating Tensions and Maintaining Engagement

A second dimension of invisible work involves emotional regulation within teams. The project's structure—characterized by remote collaboration, tight deadlines, and high expectations—creates conditions in which frustration, uncertainty, and stress frequently emerge.

Tutors play a key role in recognizing and managing these emotional dynamics. Their work includes identifying early signs of conflict, mediating disagreements, and supporting participants experiencing difficulties with workload or group dynamics. In many cases, tutors intervene informally through additional conversations or mediation efforts that extend beyond the formally defined mentoring role.

Emotional work intensifies at critical moments in the project cycle, particularly before mid-term reviews and final presentations. During these periods, tutors often help participants cope with performance pressure, maintain motivation, and restore cooperation within teams experiencing tensions. By stabilizing the emotional climate of the teams, this invisible work helps prevent disengagement and ensures continuity of collaboration.

4.4. Coordinative and Institutional Work: Managing Complexity Across Organizational Boundaries

A third form of invisible work concerns the coordination of activities across multiple institutional contexts. The EIPM program operates within a complex network of universities, academic calendars, and organizational procedures, while also involving external business partners and international evaluation panels.

Program coordinators perform extensive coordinative work to align these different institutional logics. This includes synchronizing schedules across universities, managing communication between academic and business actors, and adapting program procedures to different institutional expectations. Much of this work occurs behind the scenes and remains largely invisible to participants.

Institutional coordination becomes particularly visible during the preparation and implementation of the bootcamps, when logistical, academic, and symbolic elements must be aligned simultaneously. Ensuring that presentations, evaluations, and administrative requirements function smoothly requires continuous adjustments and negotiation among participating institutions.

4.5. Invisible Work Across the Project Lifecycle

Although invisible work is present throughout the program, its intensity and form change across different phases of the project. During the initial stage, relational work dominates as tutors and coordinators support team formation and the establishment of trust. During the extended remote collaboration phase, emotional work becomes more prominent as tutors manage emerging tensions and maintain team engagement. In the final stage of the program, coordinative and institutional work intensifies as multiple actors and evaluation procedures converge around the final presentations.

These findings demonstrate that invisible work is not a marginal phenomenon but a central mechanism enabling the functioning of complex, international educational projects. By sustaining relationships, regulating emotional dynamics, and coordinating institutional processes, tutors and coordinators provide the hidden infrastructure that allows interdisciplinary and geographically distributed teams to collaborate effectively.

5. Conclusion and implications for managing human resources in complex project teams

This study demonstrates that the functioning of international, remote, and interdisciplinary project teams relies to a substantial extent on work that remains structurally invisible. In response to RQ1, the findings show that invisible work emerges across all phases of highly complex educational projects as a network of emotional, relational, and institutional practices, becoming particularly salient at moments of uncertainty and potential disruption. Under such conditions, collaboration is sustained less by formal structures and procedures than by the everyday, informal efforts performed by tutors, mentors, and coordinators.

Addressing RQ2, the analysis reveals that invisible work operates as a hidden infrastructure of collaboration, enabling teams to transcend cultural, communicational, and institutional boundaries. By absorbing tensions, repairing relationships, supporting sensemaking, and translating institutional logics, invisible work prevents fragmentation and allows teams to maintain operational capacity despite organizational and cultural differences.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on invisible work by showing that in highly complex educational settings it is not peripheral but central, while remaining systematically marginalized within formal management structures. The findings further demonstrate that invisible work is heterogeneous, taking different forms depending on organizational role and level, thereby extending research on relational and institutional work.

From a practical standpoint, the results highlight the need to explicitly recognize invisible work as an integral component of tutoring, mentoring, and coordinating roles. Failure to acknowledge these efforts increases the risk of overload and burnout, whereas integrating

emotional, relational, and institutional competences into human resource management systems may serve a stabilizing function. The study also points to the importance of dedicated support for coordination work and the design of collaborative systems that increase the visibility of work without bureaucratizing it.

In conclusion, invisible work constitutes a key resource enabling educational organizations to operate effectively under conditions of complexity and diversity. Its systematic recognition and support are critical for the sustainability and quality of international educational projects.

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