CREATING EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL PROJECT TEAM

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Abstract
Technological advance has provided the necessary means so that organizations increasingly often make use of virtual teams, in order to gain competitive advantage. The members of this new type of teams must display certain traits and have specific skills in line with the characteristics of virtual teams and international projects. Establishing a model of personal and professional skills necessary for international virtual team members, could facilitate their selection process, helping to build efficient team, ensuring performance and thus achieving the objectives and scope of the international project. The paper, by its content, reach the targets, respectively the conceptual approach of international projects, representing their evolution, defining virtual teams characteristics and determine certain profile skills characteristics of virtual international project team members.

Key words: project management, virtual team, international project, competences.

JEL classification: M00

1. Introduction

Globalization phenomenon is the determining factor of the emergence and development of international markets for goods and services, characterized by rapid change and pressures concerning the need to increase quality and simultaneously reduce costs. International projects appeared in response to these constraints, so their success contributes decisively to the development and maintenance of their organizations in international markets.

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In the literature, the international project is defined as "a project that involves multiple locations, entities, organizations, and business units" (Lientz B., Rea K., 2003).

Despite that technological advances made available for organizations and project managers, complex virtual instruments designed to reduce distances, to increase information exchange and communication, "statistics show that 70% of the projects fails, defeating its objectives on time, budget and performance"(PMI - Project Management Institute, 2013). In these circumstances, we believe that the project teams are not working properly or are not sufficiently prepared to cope with the new environment in which the project takes place. Since 1995, Charles Handy predicted that the work will be defined as "what you do, not where you go". "In fact, converging economic, technological, and geopolitical factors have led to a new model for work and a different understanding of the workplace. Today is the age of the international virtual team" (Brewer P.E., 2015).

There are increasingly more organizations which "no longer have assigned offices, and it is increasingly common to leverage telecommuting and virtual teamwork. Laszlo Bock, vice president of People Operations at Google, states that at least 50 percent of Google employees are working on virtual teams at any given time." (Lepsinger R., DeRosa D., 2010) Effective virtual teams are able to collaborate in ways that bring success to their organizations. (Brewer P.E., 2015)

In the literature published so far about virtual teams (Brewer P.E., 2015; Lee R. Margaret , 2014) and international projects (Binder J., 2007; Koster, Kathrin, 2013), a particular importance is given to the way in which the communication between virtual team members is unfolding, as the main element of the construction team, in the presence of multiculturalism. However, we believe that virtual team members in order to communicate and collaborate successfully, they must own or acquire specific skills that have to be established in the planning phase of the project in accordance with its purpose and objectives. As a result of bibliographic research, based on the characteristics of virtual teams and international projects, we identified the key competencies in order to build an effective international virtual project team.

2. International Project Management and Leadership

Grisham T. W (2011) considers that the international project and the standard project management, share common management processes, but this does not mean that "a project manager with only domestic experience can lead an international project". Therefore he proposes a different definition for this type of project, thereby "international project management is the leadership of projects that are conducted in multiple countries and cultures" and he draws a clear line between leadership and management of international projects, believing that international project success will be ensured through 80% leadership (soft skills) and 20% management (hard skills). "Leadership involves providing direction and motivating others in their role or task to fulfil the project's objectives. It is a vital competence for a project manager." (ICB-International Project Management Association Competence Baseline, 2006). Instead, "many project managers still rely exclusively on the so-called 'hard' skills, such as planning, scheduling and controlling, to coordinate the projects." (Binder J., 2007). Marando Anne (2012) also stated that "many project managers are not able to successfully lead projects due to a deficiency of the necessary management skills".

In international projects, managers must be able to lead and manage projects from distance, relying on new communication technologies in a complex environment, which is characterized by different culture, religion, law, politics, mentalities, resources, time zones, languages. Managers are forced to lead multicultural teams, while withstanding the pressures regarding the constraints of time, cost, quality and stakeholders satisfaction. "Managers often discover that they are ill equipped to deal with the challenges presented by working with colleagues and clients from different cultures and managing projects from a distance." (Goncalves M., 2005). Thus, they must give much more importance to 'soft' skills: leadership, communication, understanding of cultural diversity and interpersonal relationship. By means of these skills, international project managers will manage to overcome one of the most important challenges, namely, the creation of the project team on the basis of established standards regarding the competences of team members. "Leading people is the first job of a project manager, followed closely by communication skills. Managing the project takes third place in our experience". (Grisham T. W 2011)

In addition, with the advent of the Internet, has been developed a new working environment – the virtual environment. "A virtual workplace is a workplace that is not located in any one physical space. It is usually in a network of several workplaces technologically connected (via a private network or the Internet) without regard to geographic boundaries. Employees are thus able to interact in a collaborated environment regardless of where they are located. A virtual workplace integrates hardware, people, and online processes." (http://research.omicsgroup.org). This new environment added the 'virtual' characteristic to international projects, transforming them and imposing a readjustment of management processes, including the creation of international virtual project team, adding new challenges on the list of the project manager, and putting more emphasis on the 'soft' skills.

Figure 1: International projects Evolution. *Source: Authors*
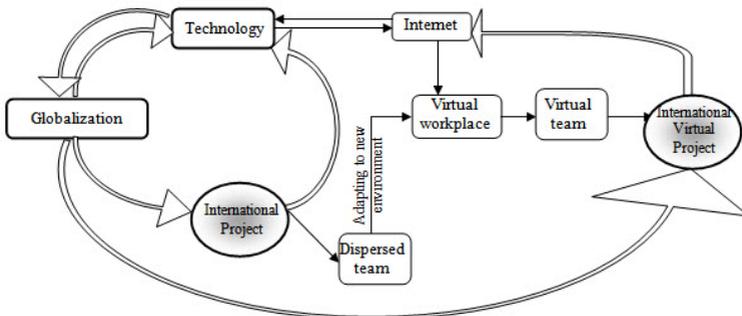
Through the medium of "Figure 1 – International projects Evolution" we have presented our vision regarding the evolution of international projects, based on the factors and the effects of globalization, where technology "plays a dual role, as a determined factor that allows the existence of globalization and also as an effect of its expansion"(Dumitraşcu, I., Dumitraşcu, D., D., 2015), and the characteristics of international projects, of which we recalled "dispersed teams" (Dumitraşcu, I., Dumitraşcu, D., D., 2015), because "international projects require the collaboration of people from different country cultures and languages" (Binder J. (2007). "An international project is one that utilizes resources from or provides services in more than one country, physically or virtually". (Grisham T. W 2011). If by the advent of the Internet,

outsourced collocated project teams were communicating by phone, fax, or through numerous face-to-face extremely expensive meetings, Internet appearance has enabled a substantial reduction of these costs and even their elimination, transforming these dispersed teams in virtual teams, enabling organizations to transform technology into a competitive advantage. "Virtual teams are now reshaping the way we think and do business" (Zofi Y., 2012). "Organizations that successfully employ virtual teams can access the human resources that allow them to compete internationally." (Radović Marković , 2015). "Management of virtual projects becomes a very important factor for the success of such ventures, as it enables project managers to asses and control projects from a distance" (Goncalves M., 2005).

2.1 What means international project success?

Grisham T. W. (2011) supports the idea that " international project success means that it satisfies the customer (quality), provides the scope agreed on, is within budget, and is within the time specified. Also IPMA (International Project Management Association) defines project success as "the appreciation by the various interested parties of the project outcomes". This definition is more challenging than "to produce the project deliverables within time and budget", which is only part of it.

Having in mind that "projects are performed by teams of people, who are usually brought together specifically for the purpose of the project" (ICB-IPMA, 2006), we believe that the selection of the team members and the quality of human resources will play a key role in having a project team with the necessary skills to use the available tools in order to communicate properly and efficiently, to adapt to a virtual environment, thus managing to ensure international project success. "Project management should make sure that individuals have the necessary technical, behavioural and contextual competences and are provided with adequate information, tools and training to perform the tasks required of them successfully." (ICB-IPMA, 2006)

3. International Virtual Team Management

"As a result of technological advances, companies are compelled to seek out innovative ways to adopt and incorporate virtual teams." (Marković D., 2015). "Virtual teams have become essentials units in successful

organizations. Where they do not exist, opportunity is lost. Where they are not functioning effectively opportunity is lost. International virtual teams are the key to some of the biggest successes and failures in the global workplace while organizations learn to operate as complex webs of people. (Brewer P.E., 2015). Organizations are only now beginning to realize that specialized skills and competences are need to lead effective virtual teams, on top of providing the right combination of virtual collaboration technology tools. (Settle-Murphy N.M., 2013).

In the literature, most authors converge towards the same direction on the definition of the term "a virtual team is one that does much of its work across distances facilitated by technology, as opposed to doing much of its work face-to-face" (Brewer P.E., 2015). A virtual team will become international when its members operate across national borders.

Given this, we should mention that the communication made through electronic tools do not transform a group of people in a virtual team. Which is why we will add to the above definition, an essential idea stated by Lee R. Margaret (2014), "these virtual teams share a common work, product, or project goal".

Managing these international teams becomes very difficult for managers, because they must select and lead people, which they cannot see, and on which the virtual environment can generate a process of depersonification process, when communication tools are not diversified or are used incorrectly causing isolation of team members, their demotivation and unconsolidated links between team members. A key element of building an international virtual team is the confidence. In fact, many organizations do not use virtual teams because of a lack of confidence in their employees. This lack of confidence is fuelled by traditional management "that believes efficiency and control are closely linked and that you can't have one without a lot of the other." (Charles Handy 1995).
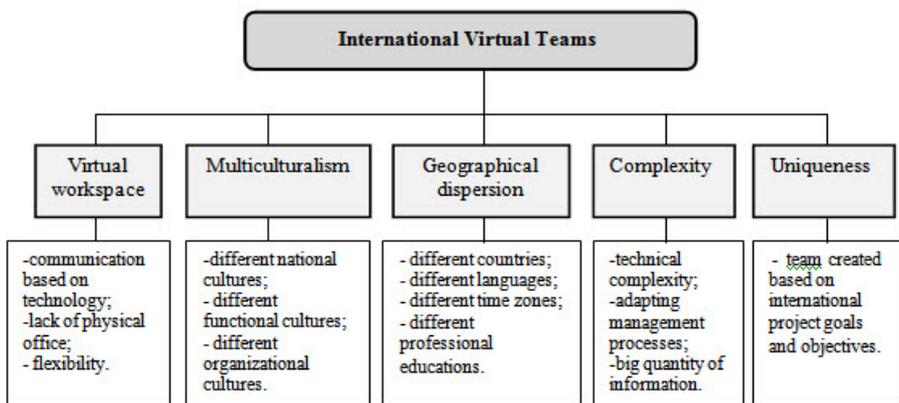
If trust is essential, the project manager will have to pay particular attention to the creation of virtual team and to select those people that could be trusted, relying on their skills.

3.1 Characteristics of International Virtual Teams

As we have stated since the beginning of this paper, we consider that to establish a virtual team structure, and the competences under which virtual

team members must be selected, we must identify the defining features of international virtual teams. "Figure 2" is a proposal in this regard, offering some explanation of each characteristic. The starting point in creating this diagram is represented by the characteristics of international projects presented in an earlier article -"How to face globalization challenges through international project management" (Dumitraşcu, I., Dumitraşcu, D., D., 2015).

Figure 2: Characteristics of International Virtual Teams.

International Virtual Teams				
Virtual workspace	Multiculturalism	Geographical dispersion	Complexity	Uniqueness
-communication based on technology; -lack of physical office; - flexibility.	-different national cultures; - different functional cultures; - different organizational cultures.	- different countries; - different languages; - different time zones; - different professional educations.	-technical complexity; -adapting management processes; -big quantity of information.	- team created based on international project goals and objectives.

Source: Authors

These features give an overview on the diversity of the international virtual teams, highlighting the need for "workers must learn new skills and new ways of communication to do the work successfully in virtual teams." (Radović Marković, 2015). Simultaneously, these characteristics impose a new perception on the international project team members, which are considered able to adapt more easily to new technologies, to changes that may occur in projects or tasks, without a decrease in productivity, to rapidly integrate into the teams and to accept new members under a low degree of socialization, compared to traditional teams.

3.2 Requiered Professional Competences for international virtual team members

Competency is the skill and capacity required to complete project activities. (PMBOK3, 2004). A competence is a collection of knowledge, personal attitudes, skills and relevant experience needed to be successful in a certain function (ICB-IPMA,2006).

In this section, we will refer only to general skills that any virtual team member needs to possess regardless of project type (IT, marketing, administrative, educational, etc.).

Marković D. (2015) conducted a study on the necessary competences of virtual team members from the point of view of a virtual university, dividing them into two categories: personal skills (the number of articles published as sole author) and collaborative (number of publications as co-author). "Practice imposes that, apart from skills and work experience, the criteria for team member selection should include the member character traits. The traits such as vigour, persistence, perseverance, tactfulness, ability to cope, loyalty to the firm are the preconditions of the team success, in as much as it is the skills and the expertise of the team members "(Marković D., 2015) As well Mesly Oliver (2015), conducted a study regarding the influence of distance on six skills specific to international projects, from which, three of them belong to the manager and three to the team members: the ability to instil confidence, the ability to cooperate and participate, and the capacity for commitment.

In addition to these categorization models of specific competencies of members, which we believe they are confined to the study undertaken by the authors, we take into account the categories of competences proposed by ICB-IPMA Competence Baseline (2006): technical competence (20 elements) behavioral competence (15 elements), contextual competence (11 elements), from which we select those items that we consider specific for international team members and also the concept of "cross-cultural intelligence", proposed by Grisham T.W (2011).

Thereby, we propose an Ishikawa diagram regarding the skills required for international virtual project team members, and we represented the soft skills at the top, and the hard skills at the bottom, thus responding to one of the most important questions of a project manager on the creation of an

international virtual team, so that its activity can be conducted in an efficient manner.

Figure 3: International virtual project team members competences. *Source: Authors*
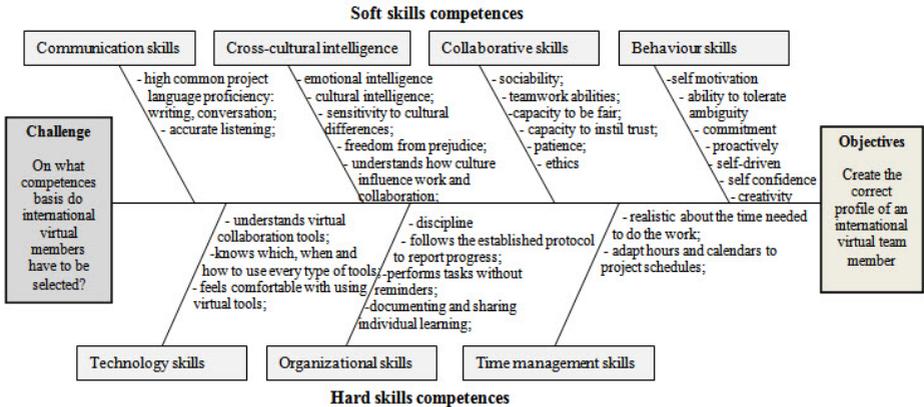
Projects have limited time resources, so candidates with a profile according to the diagram shown above are preferred, without the need for specialized training to acquire minimum skills required.

"The formation of virtual teams allows organizations to draw talent quickly from different functions, locations, and organizations. The goal is to leverage intellectual capital and apply it as quickly as possible. The methods that organizations use to manage this process can mean the difference between success and failure."(Duarte L. Deborah, 2006)

4. Conclusions

This article addresses a topical issue given the increasing number of companies carrying out international projects using virtual teams. Creating a virtual team of international project is a complex process, where establishing the general competencies of members is the starting point. The literature largely analyzes the virtual team manager profile, but the information regarding the competences of the virtual team members are reduced. Taking into account that virtual work environment and the diversity present in the international team, require different skills comparing to the traditional workplace, we considered that a bibliographic research in this regard would

help facilitate the selection process, providing to the project managers or the human resources personnel, dealing with recruiting virtual team members, a much clearer picture of the skills that members need to possess, so they can collaborate effectively.

The main contributions which this paper brings are given by the three representative schemes: Figure 1 - Evolution of international projects; Figure 2 - Characteristics of international virtual teams; Figure 3 – International virtual project team members' competences.

As well, this article is the starting point for conducting an empirical research to validate these skills, as well for a future research to determine how to quantify each competency during the selection process so as to rank different candidates and choosing the most competent. At the same time, each project manager, could add to the proposed diagram, the professional skills specific to each department within the team structure, to obtain a complete profile of each member.

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