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Isabelle Bouisse-Bloigu

Petros Chamakiotis

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CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE AND E-LEADERSHIP IN THE HYBRID VIRTUAL TEAM CONTEXT

Research-in-Progress

Bouisse-Bloigu, Isabelle, ESCP Business School, Paris, France, isabelle.bouisse_bloigu@edu.escp.eu

Chamakiotis, Petros, ESCP Business School, Madrid, Spain, pchamakiotis@escp.eu

Abstract

Hybrid work configurations challenge what we know about the role of team leader. This research-in-progress paper explores the role of cultural intelligence (CI) in virtual teams (VTs) in the hybrid context. We use the concept of CI, which has been seen as a skill that enables adaptability with a positive influence on performance in earlier types of VTs. Given that new VTs are more hybrid and characterised by high levels of complexity, our study uses cultural dimensions at the team and individual levels to explore how CI influences VTs in this new context and how leaders can leverage it to manage them. We present our two-phase research involving an exploratory survey (Phase 1) to identify popular types of hybrid work environments, and a case-study (Phase 2) involving one or two types of hybrid environments (opposite or significantly different), depending on what we will find in Phase 1. The study is expected to contribute to the fields of information systems (IS) and cross-cultural management and to offer practical recommendations for human resources (HR) managers by supporting HR initiatives and training programs and offering suggestions to e-leaders for improving team performance through the development of CI.

Keywords: e-leadership, cultural intelligence, virtual teams, hybrid work.

1 Introduction

While multinational companies (MNCs) have been using virtual teams (VTs) for decades, the Covid-19 global pandemic has acted as a catalyst for a more generalised adoption of virtual collaboration by all types of organisations. Following this widespread transition into virtual working, many workers want to keep a mix of in-person and remote work, often referred to as “hybrid work” (Saad and Wigert, 2021; Wigert and Agrawal, 2022). Several practitioner reports suggest that hybrid work configurations will be the norm, raising challenges regarding how VTs, and Global Virtual Teams (GVTs), could be managed. Chamakiotis et al. (2021) suggest that e-leaders in this new hybrid context are expected to look after additional areas, such as their team members’ well-being and work-life boundaries, which is uncommon in earlier VTs. However, we argue that their theoretical model has neglected cultural intelligence (CI), which could be a critical factor of e-leadership in this context. Indeed, previous studies on GVTs have highlighted the importance of CI in GVTs and suggested that leaders with higher levels of CI are better equipped to navigate the unique challenges posed by GVTs (Ang et al., 2007; House et al., 2002; Jung and Avolio, 1999).

CI is defined as the skill that enables a person to become flexible in understanding other cultures, learning from ongoing interactions, and gradually reshaping their thinking. It is a person’s capability to adapt successfully to unfamiliar cultural settings (Earley and Ang, 2003), and it goes beyond the broader knowledge of a culture. Even though CI is a relatively recent concept, it has “undergone a remarkable journey of growth” (Ng et al., 2009, p. 30), attracting academic and practitioner attention (e.g., Alexandra, 2022; Balbinot et al., 2022; Brand et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2022). Previous research has found that CI positively influences VT performance, improves

communication, and contributes to building trust and rapport with team members from different cultural backgrounds (Presbitero, 2021; Shaik et al., 2021). Additionally, studies suggest that CI can help e-leaders adapt their leadership styles to suit the cultural norms and preferences of their VT members, promoting higher levels of engagement and motivation (Davidaviciene and Al Majzoub, 2022).

Even if current hybrid VTs (HVTs) differ from traditional GVTs as they are not as globally diverse because they are more locally or nationally dispersed (Chamakiotis et al., 2021), they still bear a high level of complexity that CI could help manage. Cultural complexity has been studied through the lens of cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1984; Pelto, 1968; Triandis, 2004; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998). Indeed, cultural dimensions refer to the differences in values, norms and beliefs that exist among team members and can impact their behaviour, attitudes, and communication styles. If cultural dimensions have been initially used at the national level, further cross-cultural research has respectively applied and confirmed their relevance at the team and individual level (e.g., Kirkman et al., 2006; Maznevski et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2006; Taras et al., 2010). In this paper, we will use cultural dimensions, at the team and individual level, to determine the cultural complexity and related challenges of current HVTs and will address the following research questions (RQs):

- How does CI influence VTs in the new hybrid context (i.e., HVTs)?
- How can e-leaders leverage CI to manage HVTs?

2 Literature Review

2.1 New hybrid work context and HVTs

Before studying e-leadership and CI in this context, defining the new hybrid work context and HVTs is essential. Indeed, the professional literature treats some of these terms (e.g., remote work, telework, mobile work, e-work, work-from-home) interchangeably. However, while the common denominator of most of these terms is that workers interact (perhaps to different degrees) via technology, there are significant differences (e.g., Daft and Lengel, 1986; Powell et al., 2004; Grant et al., 2013; Richter, 2020). Consequently, we have been reviewing the existing academic literature drawing on articles published from 1975 to 2021 in the fields of Information Systems (IS), cross-cultural management, international business, organisational behaviour, and communication in our effort to generate a typology of different types of technology-mediated forms of work (Table 1). Our typology considers the chronological evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and different research domains such as Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), Telecommuting and VTs (see Messenger and Gschwind, 2016; Raghuram et al., 2019).

Evolution of ICTs	Umbrella definition and characteristics	Terms used in peer-reviewed journals and professional/popular press	Example sources
1 st generation of ICTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work done outside the employer's premises is done from home • Through the use of telephone and computers • Stationery work • Worktime organisation: from totally to partially away from employer's premises 	Telework, Telecommuting, Home working, Computer-mediated collaboration Technology-mediated work Computer-supported groups	(e.g., Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Baruch and Nicholson, 1997; Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Nilles, 1988)

2 nd generation of ICTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work done neither from the employer's premises nor from home but from third places (including client's office or other employer's office branches, co-working spaces, and even cafes) • Through the use of laptops and mobile phones • Working time organization: partially away from employer's premises 	Mobile work Remote work Dispersed groups/ teams Virtual groups/teams GVTs Local VTs Covid-19 VTs Reconfigured VTs HVTs	(e.g., Ancona et al., 2021; Gibson and Gibbs, 2006; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000; Panteli et al., 2019)
3 rd generation of ICTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work done "on the move" in intermediate spaces in between the employer's premises, home and third places • Through the use of New ICTs such as smartphones, tablets and cloud-based technology • Working time organisation: flexible, blurring lines between professional and personal life 	Flexible working, Flexwork, Digital nomad, e-nomad, e-work New ways of work	(e.g., Bittman et al., 2009; Makimoto and Manners, 1997; Popma, 2013)

Table 1. A chronological overview of technology-mediated forms of work.

From our typology, we define hybrid work as work arrangements that combine working from a traditional office setting with partially working virtually. It allows employees to have flexible work location and schedule while maintaining a connection to the organisation and their colleagues. Consequently, we propose to define HVTs as permanent, intra-organisational, polychronic teams that are locally dispersed and adopt hybrid work (as defined above). So, this conceptualisation moves away from the static definition of teams as either pure face-to-face (F2F) teams or purely virtual (Dixon and Panteli, 2010) and shows how complex HVTs are due to the multiple and simultaneous combinations of office work and virtual work possible. We also argue that HVTs bear a high level of cultural complexity, which can be grasped through the lens of cultural dimensions. Previous researches have studied how cultural dimensions impact VT team member's individual preferences regarding the use of ICTs (Kramer et al., 2017), the adoption of telework and its effects on employees' digital well-being (Adamovic, 2022), VTs' communication and collaboration (Zakaria, 2017), and VTs' conflict management (Paul and McDaniel, 2004). Such cultural complexity is even heightened as those cultural dimension preferences may not be fixed but dynamic, and individuals could switch behaviours depending on purpose, situation and people (Kramer et al., 2017; Zakaria, 2017).

2.2 E-leadership and VTs

Van Wart et al. (2019) conceptualised e-leadership based on six competencies: e-communication skills (clarity, avoiding miscommunication, managing communication flow), e-social skills (providing support), e-team building skills (motivation, accountability, recognition), e-change management skills (change techniques), e-technological skills (proper use of ICTs, blending traditional and virtual methods, technological knowledge, security), and e-trustworthiness (sense of trust, honesty, consistency, follow-through, fairness, integrity, work-life balance, support of diversity). E-leaders in VTs need to perform multifaceted tasks that range from choosing ICTs in line with the cultural idiosyncrasies of the team members to creating a psychologically safe work environment and promoting a sense of collectivity (Gibson et al., 2014; Chamakiotis et al., 2021). In the existing literature, e-leadership has been recognised as essential to VT performance, mainly by tackling the specific challenges VTs face (e.g., Gilson et al., 2015; Contreras et al., 2020). However, critical challenges in HVTs include building and maintaining relationships (71%); being spontaneous with

colleagues (68%); zoom fatigue (61%); managing conflicts and disagreements (54%); and feelings of isolation (53%) (Schell, 2022). These practitioner concerns echo scholarly calls suggesting that e-leadership requires additional studies in the HVT context (Cañibano et al., 2020; Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

2.3 Cultural Intelligence and VTs

CI is a skill that has been defined through four dimensions: cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and behavioural (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008). Cognitive CI is an individual's knowledge about different values, norms and beliefs acquired from educational and personal experiences. Metacognitive CI is an individual's ability to be attentive, pick cues from cross-cultural interactions, and reflect on the existing knowledge to modify it. Motivational CI reflects the "capability to direct attention and energy towards learning about and functioning in situations characterised by cultural differences" (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008, p. 6). Behavioural CI is the capability of an individual to exhibit a set of verbal and non-verbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008).

CI has been considered a critical skill for e-leaders due to globalisation and, more importantly, work digitalisation (Rüth and Netzer, 2020). Previous studies have highlighted the importance of CI in GVTs' performance (Presbitero, 2016; Presbitero and Toledano, 2018) and suggested that leaders with higher levels of CI are better equipped to navigate the unique challenges posed by GVTs (Ang et al., 2007; House et al., 2002; Jung and Avolio, 1999). Specifically, CI can significantly impact e-leadership through its influence on communication, conflict management, leadership style adaptation, team engagement and trust. First, CI can improve communication in GVTs, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural differences and virtuality (spatial and time distance, lack of verbal and non-verbal cues) (Ang and Inkpen, 2008; Presbitero, 2021). CI could help e-leaders "accommodate" their communication (Gallois et al., 2005; Presbitero, 2021), which positively impacts interpersonal synergy and direction in GVTs (Watson et al., 2003). In other words, they could adapt their behaviour to create, maintain or decrease social distance, resulting in a friendly and accepting work environment that promotes collaboration towards shared goals (Presbitero, 2021). CI dimensions have been associated with transformational leadership capabilities, deemed most effective for VTs (Dagher, 2010; Ruggieri, 2009). When combined with transformational leadership, CI has been shown to reduce relationship conflicts while supporting the positive impact of task conflict on decision-making (Davidaviciene and Al Majzoub, 2022). Thus, leaders with high CI level would be more inclined to promote knowledge and information sharing among team members, to encourage innovation and creativity, and to facilitate multicultural negotiation, task performance, cultural judgment, and decision-making (Keung and Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2013; Susskind and Odom-Reed, 2019). When combined with emotional intelligence, CI can even prevent conflicts from occurring in GVTs (Davai et al., 2022). In terms of leadership style adaptation, CI can assist e-leaders in adapting their leadership style to align with the cultural norms and preferences of their VT members, leading to higher engagement and motivation levels (Davidaviciene and Al Majzoub, 2022; Ang et al., 2007; House et al., 2002; Jung and Avolio, 1999). E-leaders with high motivational CI are more likely to enable individual contributions, synchronise tasks, and integrate diverse perspectives, thus reducing VTs' faultlines and improving social integration and team performance (Richter et al., 2021). CI has been found to reduce the formation of in-groups in GVTs, allowing team members to overcome challenges arising from their unique contexts, and fostering team identification (Shaik et al., 2019), which is especially important in GVTs that face challenges such as reduced proximity, fewer F2F interactions, and increased technology-enabled communication (Lau and Murnighan, 1998; Davis-Blake and Broschak, 2009; Phillips et al., 2009). Finally, research has shown that CI can be beneficial in building trust and rapport among GVTs' members (Shaik et al., 2021a, 2021b). When team members, including e-leaders, exhibit higher levels of CI, they are more likely to trust each other and delay judgment, generating multiple interpretations of people's behaviours and increasing

openness with and among VT members, ultimately enhancing team member engagement (Brislin et al., 2006; Ott and Michailova, 2018; Shaik et al., 2021a).

3 Conceptual Model

We developed a conceptual model (Figure 1) that shows the relationships between CI and e-leadership in the HVT context. Our conceptual model aims to critically extend the theoretical model proposed by Chamakiotis et al. (2021). According to their theoretical model, the authors have made two propositions. The first one suggests that e-leaders of reconfigured VTs can foster their teams' creative performance and innovation by adapting their practices to promote relationships via the guanxi principle to ensure team engagement and maintain a high level of trust. The second one advocates that by looking after their VT members' digital well-being and work-life boundaries, e-leaders can indirectly influence team engagement and trust (by extension, relationships) and directly influence teams' creative performance and innovation.

Regarding the first proposition, we argue that CI can help e-leaders build, maintain, and even strengthen HVT members' relationships thanks to its influence on communication and conflicts:

- E-leaders adapt communication styles to team members' cultural preferences through communication accommodation, creating stronger bonds and facilitating work collaboration. It nuances the authors' guanxi principle by allowing the e-leader to adopt an appropriate level of familiarity, affective warmth, and use of direct or indirect language.
- E-leaders can anticipate and address conflicts in a culturally sensitive manner, thus enabling direct positive relationships and indirectly fostering team engagement and trust.
- CI can directly enable formal and informal e-leaders to build trust and engagement by reducing the formation of in-groups and facilitating team cohesion and identity.

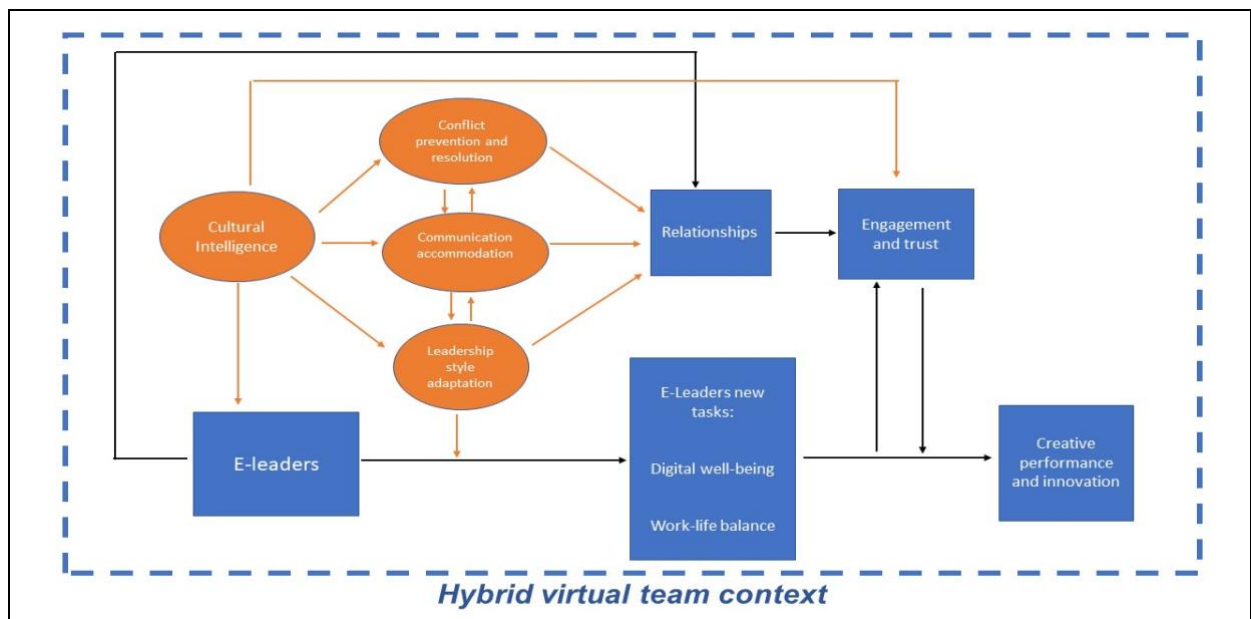


Figure 1. Our conceptual model: Critical extension of Chamakiotis et al. (2021).

Regarding Chamakiotis et al.'s (2021) second proposition, we first argue that thanks to CI, e-leaders can adapt their leadership styles to suit the cultural preferences of their VT members. Thus, e-leaders could navigate between the different alternatives of leadership styles (transformational, shared leadership or co-leadership) at the same time. Moreover, if all VT members have high CI levels,

informal leaders ‘from within’ could also leverage leadership adaptability. Such adaptability can enable e-leaders to manage the work-life boundaries preferences of VT members by sensing the individual cultural preferences (power distance, individualism/collectivism, long-term/short-term) with their boundary management styles (segmenters vs integrators). Consequently, e-leaders could leverage CI to ensure that VT members’ job demands do not exceed their job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). So, e-leaders could adapt their leadership practices to avoid technostress and burnout and enable VT members to adopt proper work-life boundary management. Finally, we argue that e-leaders with a high level of CI will also be sensitive to the cultural preferences of VT members regarding the choice of ICTs (e.g., synchronicity and information value) and their preferred hybrid work configuration (e.g., amount of time in office, work from home or third spaces). Consequently, it can help them manage the multiplicity of hybrid work configurations by deciding on the best fit between technology, task and culture to ensure VT members’ digital well-being.

4 Research Design and Data Collection Process

To empirically research and answer our RQs, our data collection will consist of a two-phase study involving an online survey (Phase 1) to explore the types of hybrid work environments that are currently used, and a case study (Phase 2) involving one or two types of hybrid environments (opposite or significantly different), depending on what we will find in Phase 1.

4.1 Phase 1: Exploratory Study

The goal of Phase 1 is to get a better sense of the different types of popular hybrid work environments. Over two months, data will be collected through an online questionnaire using an appropriate tool (such as Google Form or SurveyMonkey) using the lead author’s LinkedIn professional network. Our survey sample will be 2000 professionals, and our criteria for selection will be employees and managers from various industries (mainly retail, consulting, education and tech) and organisations located in different countries, including Asian and European countries. We aim to recruit approximately 200 respondents. The questionnaire will be structured in two parts: (a) closed-ended questions related to the type of hybrid work arrangements that exist in their organisations, including any experience of virtual/hybrid work before the Covid-19 pandemic, and the decision process regarding working full-time from home, from the office, or a combination of both; and (b) an open space for participants to provide comments that may not be captured in our specific questions. The closed-ended questions will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns and relationships among the different types of hybrid work environments. The open space will be analysed through text analysis to uncover hidden insights and trends about hybrid working environments. We purposefully keep the Phase 1 sample and selection criteria relatively broad as it is an exploratory study. We expect to find a variety of hybrid work environments across different organisations and industries, each with unique characteristics. This should allow us to associate a particular industry/organisation as representative of specific type of hybrid work environment and use it for Phase 2.

4.2 Phase 2: Case Study

For Phase 2, we plan to adopt a qualitative methodology and a case study (e.g., Dubé and Paré, 2003; Yin, 2011). Depending on the results of Phase 1, we will select an organisation where the management has intentionally implemented hybrid work permanently in an industry where generalised hybrid work is a new practice (i.e., not in place before the Covid-19 pandemic) such as Direct-To-Consumer industries such as retail industry (e.g., fashion, luxury, beauty, lifestyle). Data collection will be done through semi-structured interviews, allowing us to explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the topic in question, while remaining flexible to delve deeply into sensitive issues or specific

themes that may evolve throughout the study. We intend to interview 30 participants. Our first criterion of selection is to interview knowledge workers, that is to say, participants from functions such as HR, finance, purchasing, marketing, and e-commerce, as the means of collaboration and duties they provide are information and insights that can be quickly produced, shared and exchanged in hybrid work arrangements (Gibbs et al., 2021, 2017). Our second selection criterion is interviewing team leaders and non-leaders as leadership providers and receivers. We will use an iterative process between collecting and analysing data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser et al., 1968). Depending on how the study will shape up, we may consider conducting a second case study for comparative purposes (e.g., to compare how CI plays out in opposite or significantly different types of HVTs context). Data analysis is planned to follow thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to enable us to address our RQs inductively.

5 Envisaged Debates, Discussions and Contributions

This work is expected to add to academic debates and discussions and to offer practical contributions. On the academic front, our findings are likely to contribute to the IS and cross-cultural management research domains by extending relevant studies (e.g., Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Davaei et al., 2022; Davidaviciene and Al Majzoub, 2022) and explaining the relations between CI and leadership in the current HVT context. On the practical front, our findings could influence HR initiatives and training programmes by inculcating CI in VTs' team leaders and team members while offering actionable suggestions on how leaders of HVTs could use CI to manage challenges and improve team performance.

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