Leadership Reconfigurations In Dynamic Global Virtual Teams

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TREO Paper

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Abstract

In this TREO paper, we use theory on Global Virtual Teams' (GVTs) continuities/discontinuities (Watson-Manheim et al., 2012) to examine how leadership is (re)configured in response to dynamic membership in contemporary GVTs by studying 16 GVTs whereby we unexpectedly switched 28 members between different GVTs half-way through the project. Drawing on observations, communications extracts, and 274 reports completed by our participants before/after the unexpected switch, our preliminary analysis begins to unpack the mechanisms through which leadership is reconfigured to accommodate dynamic membership. The mechanisms show how dynamic membership as a discontinuity reconfigures leadership, subsequently generating new continuities.

Keywords: Global virtual teams, leadership reconfiguration.

1   Introduction and Background

While global virtual teams (GVTs) and their management constitute a widely studied topic in the literature (e.g., Gilson et al. 2023), there has recently been recognition that the very nature of teams is changing, becoming much more dynamic than it used to be. Our position in this paper is that this is particularly important for GVTs, and it may have an impact on how leadership is practised. In general, there is an acknowledgement that leadership in the GVT context (aka e-leadership) is different from traditional leadership and that it is much more shared and emergent (e.g., Chamakiotis and Panteli 2017; Nordbäck and Espinosa 2019) in comparison to leadership in traditional, physically collocated teams. Further to different leadership styles, like the ones mentioned above, this literature also suggests specific actions that GVT leaders should be responsible for (e.g., Chamakiotis et al. 2021). Still, existing literature in this area offers a 'static' understanding of leadership, focused on either general responsibilities due to the technology-mediated character of (different types of) GVTs, or responsibilities that correspond to the different phases of the GVT lifecycle (Zander et al. 2013). With the present study, our goal is to develop new understandings as to "how leaders and workers in remote work environments are being unmade, made, and remade through dynamic relational processes mediated by technology and embedded wholly or partly in new virtual contexts" (Knappitsch 2023, p. 367). We draw on Suchman's (2012) 'configuration' concept as the theoretical lens of the study. Herein, configuration is conceptualised as a method assemblage that enables the gathering and constitution and reenactment of different things together, enabling the re-enactment of relationships. We thus pose the following research question (RQ):

> *How is leadership (re)configured in the context of dynamic membership in GVTs?*

To address our RQ, we adopted a case study approach that involved student teams across different universities. We adopted an interpretive qualitative approach and drew on observations, communication

extracts, and individual reflection reports completed to understand the impact dynamic membership had on the teams' leadership configurations.

Our study is envisaged to fill an important theoretical gap by unpacking what complex leadership configurations look like in the context of GVTs in today's environment wherein team membership is more dynamic than ever before. We envisage to shed on light on this important, and empirically under-researched, issue by offering empirical evidence in response to recent relevant calls in this area (Chamakiotis et al. 2021; Knappitsch 2023). Given the widespread deployment of GVTs around the world, and renewed interest in technology-mediated forms of work (including hybrid working), we anticipate that our work will offer important contributions to management and Information Systems (IS) scholarship and may be used to guide practitioners and educators who focus on the skills required by current and future generations of practitioners respectively.

2 Research Approach

We took the case of VIBu (Virtual Teams in International Business)—an online learning simulation that has been utilised globally with over 60 different higher-education institutions and various private sector organisations and studied 16 GVTs involving a total of 204 student participants from 5 universities in 4 countries (Austria, Finland, UK, and USA). The GVT project involved an intervention whereby we 'unexpectedly' switched 28 participants between teams in order to be able to study dynamic membership in real time. Our data involved 164 reflective reports before the switch (whereby participants commented on the leadership behaviour in their teams) and 110 reflective reports after the switch (whereby participants reflected on how the switch impacted leadership configuration). Additionally, we reviewed communications between the teams and conducted direct observations during the project.

3 Findings

Analysis so far has revealed mechanisms of leadership (re)configuration. A first mechanism of leadership reconfiguration relates to the transformation of existing leadership styles. In this case, although typically centred leadership is exercised by a single individual within a GVT, in the context of our study, centred leadership was (paradoxically) found to be shared. This was because formal responsibilities could not be taken by one individual in each team and we therefore observed that several leaders emerged on an on-demand basis, giving rise to co-leadership styles (Chamakiotis and Panteli 2017) whereby two members of the same team led different team activities simultaneously. In fact, our data suggest that both shared leadership (whereby one leader was succeeded by another one) and co-leadership (whereby two individuals were leading simultaneously) were evident. However, this was not limited to the stable members of the teams.

Interestingly, and although incoming members were sometimes seen as a 'disruption' by some, there was evidence in our data that some of them were able to adapt quickly to their receiving teams to the extent that they undertook leadership roles. In these cases, not only were they not a disruption, but they were accepted as leaders within their receiving teams, generating completely new leadership configurations. Therefore, here we see evidence of how adaptation leads to leadership (re)configuration, our second mechanism of leadership configuration in dynamic GVTs:

> *"Leaders [adapted] to the changing of team members and [passed] on the role to new emergent leaders throughout the day. This style helped tremendously dealing with the new members as we got to understand what the new member's strengths were so that they could take on a task that they would excel at."* (Mila, GVT 7)

It follows that though dynamic membership, which imply incoming members into an already established GVT, may appear as a disruption and therefore discontinuity, it also creates the opportunity for continuities contributing to enriching GVT performance through new capabilities and knowhow including leadership practices.

These findings posit that leadership configurations in dynamic GVTs may indeed be more complex and that there are mechanisms through which it is reconfigured due to the discontinuities created by dynamic

membership (often seen as disruption) and the subsequent continuities whereby leadership is reconfigured to accommodate the new team composition.

4   Theoretical Contributions and Implications

Addressing relevant calls (Knappitsch 2023), our analysis begins to show how leadership is made, unmade and remade through a constant reconfiguration and adaptation involving different mechanisms, such as a the transformation of existing leadership styles as well as through moving from team adaptation to leadership reconfiguration. Although some of the leadership styles and actions we identified are known in the literature (e.g., Chamakiotis and Panteli 2017; Nordbäck and Espinosa 2019), our findings illustrate how they play out in a dynamic fashion throughout the GVT lifecycle, explaining how they collectively reconfigure GVTs' leadership structure in the context of dynamic membership, while also extending GVT discontinuity theory (Watson-Manheim et al. 2012) and earlier frameworks of GVT leadership promoting rather static understandings of leadership (Zander et al. 2013) which are not relevant in the context of dynamic GVTs. At the conference, we will be presenting our fuller analysis whilst seeking feedback on how to refine our theoretical contributions.

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