

Managing cross-cultural virtual IT project teams during COVID-19 remote work transition: Lessons learned and best practices

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Abstract

The sudden shift to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic posed unique challenges to IT project management, especially for cross-cultural virtual teams. This paper examines the impact of this transition on virtual IT project teams distributed across cultures and geographies. Through qualitative multi-case studies across finance, healthcare, and software sectors, this research identifies key challenges, leadership adaptations, communication strategies, and technology enablers. The findings emphasize the importance of cultural intelligence, trust-building, flexible policies, and multimodal communication in maintaining team cohesion and productivity. Lessons learned and best practices are discussed to guide IT project managers in successfully navigating virtual cross-cultural collaborations during crises.

Keywords: Covid-19; Remote working; Work From Home; Project management; Agile

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented and rapid shift to remote work worldwide. For IT project teams distributed across multiple countries and cultures, this transition compounded existing challenges inherent in virtual collaboration. Managing cross-cultural virtual teams requires understanding complex dynamics including cultural differences, communication barriers, trust issues, and technology reliance.

While virtual teams have existed for decades, the pandemic-induced transition was often sudden and unplanned, demanding new strategies to maintain project momentum and team well-being. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of IT project teams managing this transition and to extract lessons and best practices applicable to future remote work scenarios.

2. Literature Review

Virtual teams in IT projects leverage ICT tools to overcome geographical distance, providing access to diverse skills and perspectives (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). However, they face challenges due to cultural differences that affect communication, trust, and collaboration (Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012). Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework (1991) remains foundational in explaining variations in communication styles, power distance, and individualism affecting team interactions.

Trust is critical for virtual teams' success but is difficult to develop without face-to-face contact (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Prior research emphasizes frequent and transparent communication, reliability, and shared norms as enablers.

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The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional complexities such as blurred work-life boundaries, increased stress, and technology fatigue (Kniffin et al., 2021). Waizenegger et al. (2020) highlight the concept of "affordances," the capabilities technology provides to support collaboration, as key to understanding remote work effectiveness.

Leadership styles that emphasize emotional intelligence, empathy, and adaptability have been linked to better outcomes in virtual teams (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). Nevertheless, few longitudinal studies examine cross-cultural virtual IT teams navigating forced remote work transitions during crises.

3. Methodology

A qualitative multi-case study approach was adopted involving three organizations in finance, healthcare, and software development sectors. Each had cross-cultural IT project teams spanning multiple continents.

Data collection methods included

- Semi-structured interviews with 15 IT project managers, Scrum Masters, developers, and QA engineers.
- Analysis of project documentation, communication logs, and meeting recordings from the first six months of remote work.
- Participant observation during virtual meetings to assess communication dynamics and leadership behaviors.

Interviews focused on challenges faced, strategies adopted, technology used, and perceived impacts on effectiveness. Thematic analysis identified patterns and lessons learned. Ethical standards including consent and confidentiality were observed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Communication Challenges

Teams reported loss of informal communication channels leading to misunderstandings and reduced context cues. A developer from a high-context culture commented on difficulty interpreting subtlety in text-based chats.

4.2. Leadership Adaptations

Leaders adopting culturally intelligent and empathetic approaches fostered psychological safety, allowing team members to openly share concerns. Regular check-ins and active listening were common successful practices.

4.3. Technology as Enabler and Challenge

Tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams facilitated meetings but contributed to fatigue and reduced spontaneity. Asynchronous communication helped bridge time zones but slowed immediate issue resolution. Training in tool use proved essential.

4.4. Trust Building and Team Norms

Explicit communication protocols, transparency, and reliability norms helped build trust despite physical distance. Conflict resolution guidelines tailored to cultural preferences mitigated misunderstandings.

4.5. Flexible Policies and Well-being

Acknowledging diverse personal circumstances, teams adopted flexible schedules and adjusted performance expectations emphasizing outcomes over process compliance.

5. Best Practices and Lessons Learned

- Emphasize cultural awareness and tailor communication accordingly.
- Invest in leadership development focusing on empathy and adaptability.
- Utilize a balanced mix of synchronous and asynchronous tools.
- Provide comprehensive training for technology platforms.
- Establish clear, culturally sensitive norms and conflict resolution strategies.

- Promote psychological safety and flexible work policies.
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6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated remote work adoption, exposing gaps in managing cross-cultural virtual IT teams. This study highlights the need for culturally adaptive leadership, strategic communication, trust-building, and technology proficiency to sustain productivity and engagement. Future research should explore long-term impacts and technological innovations supporting virtual collaboration.

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