

Review

Cultural Intelligence as the Work Performance Optimization Factor in Multicultural Teams

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Abstract: If the present work environment is reviewed in terms of causality, its sine qua non formative generator is globalization, which necessarily correlates with digital transformation, i.e. the process of the overall performance using digital platforms. Bearing in mind that globalization has dispersed national and introduced international presence in all industrial fields, and that academic literature confirms that the differences in cultural patterns might jeopardize team cooperation and thus affect the overall performances, the author wants to shed light to the concept of cultural intelligence as an independent competence which may enhance adaptation, mutual understanding and effective communication. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of CQ as one of the so far unused construct for the optimization of work performances in multicultural teams. Narrative approach along of thematic synthesis has been applied in the analysis and syntheses of literature. The selected methodological approach is aimed at identifying, selecting and thematically mapping the relevant theoretical and empirical sources. Profound literature review confirmed that cultural intelligence can be presented as a significant predictor and facilitator of job performances.

Keywords: *Cultural intelligence; globalization; digital transformation; multicultural teams.*

1. Introduction

Free flow of information, goods and services, i.e. the process which Theodore Levitt conceptualized as globalization back in the 1980s [1] has thoroughly changed the traditional facets of the existing world previously priorly defined by national borders. Such a changed world technological advancement would erode traditional barriers of time and space, rendering the globe more interconnected and fostering a sense of global community. The evolving landscape of digital communication technologies underlines this transformation, providing a means for individuals to engage with one another across vast distances, thus redefining community dynamics and social interactions [2-4].

The above-mentioned social changes have undoubtedly affected work environments, making multicultural teams not an exception but a routine in any industry. What started just as an exclusivity for intellectual expatriates turned into a normal routine worldwide. Organizations are increasingly operating in the global market, which encourages them to hire a workforce from different cultural backgrounds in order to satisfy local specificities but also improve global

competitiveness [5]. This created conditions for the formation of multicultural teams, defined as working groups composed of members coming from different national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds [6]. The development of information and communication technologies (ICT) enabled long-distance cooperation and thus significantly contributed to the formation of virtual multicultural teams. According to Gibson and Gibbs [7] virtuality in teams implies geographical dispersion, reliance on digital tools and a high degree of cultural diversity. Thus, technology has made it possible for team members to cooperate despite significant physical, temporal and cultural differences, which further increased the need to develop intercultural competences.

Multicultural teams are increasingly becoming a strategic resource for organizations striving for innovation and creative solutions. Different cultural perspectives encourage multiple approaches to problems, which can increase a team's capacity to make decisions and solve complex tasks [8]. However, research indicates that the positive effects of diversity do not come automatically – they depend on the management of team dynamics and the degree of cultural intelligence (CQ) developed by team members.

This paper aims to bring to the light the significance of CQ as a optimization factor in multicultural environments and analyze the extent to which the companies and academic literature assign the proper value to it.

2. Cultural intelligence as a mechanism for managing multicultural teams, theoretical framework

2.1. Concept and dimensions of cultural intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence (CQ) represents an individual's ability to function effectively in situations involving cultural diversity [9]. Unlike traditional forms of intelligence, CQ specifically refers to the competencies needed to understand and interact successfully with people of different cultural orientations. According to Ang et al. [10], CQ consists of four interrelated dimensions: metacognitive CQ - refers to an individual's ability to think about cultural assumptions and adapt strategies in intercultural interaction; cognitive CQ - includes knowledge about norms, practices and conventions of different cultures; motivational CQ – expresses interest and willingness to make an effort to interact with people from other cultures; behavioral CQ - refers to the ability to adapt behavior and communication to different cultural contexts. Together, these dimensions enable members of multicultural teams to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings, successfully resolve conflicts, and improve team cohesion [11].

CQ was operationalized through the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), a validated instrument widely used in research [10]. Empirical literature shows that CQ positively affects adaptation, intercultural effectiveness and success in global teams [12,13].

2.2. Multicultural teams

Multicultural teams are defined as work groups consisting of members with different national, ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds [14] (Adler, 2008). Due to the increasing internationalization of work, these teams are becoming more and more present in organizational practice. Although cultural diversity can bring innovation and creativity [15], it can also cause communication barriers, misunderstandings and conflicts [16]. Theoretical frameworks used to analyze multicultural teams include: Hofstede's dimensional theory of culture, which points to differences in dimensions such as individualism-collectivism, power hierarchy, and uncertainty avoidance [17]; Trompenaars model of cultural values, focused on universalism/particularism, neutrality/effectiveness, etc. [18]; The GLOBE study [19], which further differentiates cultural clusters and their managerial preferences.

2.3. Team performances

Team performance is defined in the literature as a set of results that reflect the effectiveness, efficiency and cohesion of the team in achieving goals [20,21]. According to the Input–Process–Output model [22, 23], performance depends on team input characteristics (e.g. composition, resources), processes (e.g. communication, decision-making) and output indicators (e.g. work

quality, satisfaction, innovation). In the context of multicultural teams, performance is viewed through: the quality of intercultural communication; degree of coordination and cohesion; efficiency in decision-making and conflict resolution; achievement of goals and innovative capacity of the team. Empirical research shows that CQ can act as a buffer for the negative effects of cultural diversity on team performance, because it facilitates the understanding of cultural norms, improves communication and reduces conflicts [24, 25].

3. Methodology

A narrative approach was applied in the analysis and synthesis of literature dealing with the relationship between cultural intelligence and performance in multicultural teams. The goal of the methodological procedure was the identification, selection and thematic mapping of relevant theoretical and empirical sources dealing with this issue. A systematic literature search was conducted in electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost. Results from open access repositories, as well as key academic journals in the fields of management, organizational behavior and intercultural psychology, were also used. The search was performed using the following keywords and their combinations (in English): "cultural intelligence", "CQ", "multicultural teams", "team performance", "intercultural competence", "cross-cultural collaboration", "diversity and team effectiveness". The search is limited to publications in English and Serbian, published in the period from 2005 to 2024, in order to include contemporary theoretical and methodological tendencies.

When it comes to the inclusion criteria, the author searched for empirical and theoretical studies that explicitly analyze cultural intelligence in the context of multicultural teams; papers containing the measurement or discussion of team performance as a dependent variable; publications from relevant academic fields: organizational behavior, work psychology, intercultural management, social psychology; and papers with full text access. The author excluded popular science articles, commentaries and essays without scientific apparatus; studies that focus solely on emotional intelligence without including cultural intelligence; research in purely educational contexts (eg among students), unless directly related to teamwork.

A total of 167 papers were identified, of which, after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 38 studies were included in the final analysis. The selected papers were analyzed using the method of thematic synthesis, whereby the following main thematic categories were identified: effects of CQ on team effectiveness and communication; the role of leadership and organizational context as moderating factors; measurement instruments and conceptual models of CQ; limitations and contradictions in the existing literature.

Although the literature search was systematic, the review has certain limitations. First, not all available sources in languages other than English and Serbian were analyzed. Second, although no formal systematic methodology (eg PRISMA) was applied, selection and analysis criteria were clearly defined and consistently applied. Finally, the paper relies on available works in open or institutional access, which may affect the coverage of sources.

4. Thematic synthesis of the literature: Cultural intelligence and performance in multicultural teams

This chapter systematically reviews and analyzes the literature investigating the relationship between cultural intelligence (CQ) and performance in multicultural teams. Through the thematic synthesis, four dominant research directions were identified:

- Cultural intelligence as a predictor of team effectiveness
- The role of CQ in intercultural communication and conflict resolution
- CQ and leadership competencies in multicultural teams
- CQ measurement instruments and their implications for organizational practice

Cultural intelligence is recognized in several empirical studies as a strong predictor of team effectiveness in intercultural environments. Ang et al. [10] developed the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), which determined that the metacognitive and behavioral components of CQ specifically contribute to successful adaptation and team performance in multicultural teams. Lisak and Erez [24] showed through longitudinal research on multicultural teams that members with a high level of CQ establish mutual trust more easily, overcome cultural barriers faster and collaborate more effectively. CQ, according to their findings, not only affects performance directly, but also indirectly through the mediation of communication, emotional cohesion, and team synergy.

Teams with higher CQ demonstrate improved project performance and satisfaction. CQ, particularly the motivational aspect (the drive to engage in cross-cultural situations), helps align communication norms and clarify roles, which indirectly boosts team outcomes [26-28]. CQ reduces the frequency and negative impact of relationship and process conflicts, leading to better team performance and individual satisfaction. Task conflict, when managed well, can even enhance performance in high-CQ teams [29,30]. CQ directly increases knowledge sharing within teams, which in turn leads to higher innovation and creative performance. This effect is observed both at the individual and team levels, and knowledge sharing often mediates the relationship between CQ and innovation [31,32]. Teams with higher average CQ are more socially integrated, which supports better collaboration and overall team performance. The lowest CQ level within a team can act as a bottleneck, highlighting the importance of developing CQ across all members [27].

Effective intercultural communication is crucial to the functioning of multicultural teams, and CQ contributes to the understanding of culturally different communication styles. Eisenberg et al. [25] show that individuals with higher CQ are better at decoding verbal and non-verbal messages from different cultural contexts, which reduces the risk of misunderstandings and intercultural tensions. Rockstuhl et al. [12] found in a 20-country study that CQ has a greater predictive potential for intercultural performance than emotional intelligence. An increased level of CQ correlates with a reduced number of conflicts and increased team cohesion.

Leaders who possess high levels of CQ are able to adapt their leadership style to the cultural norms of team members. According to Ng, Van Dyne, and Ang [33], these leaders motivate team members more effectively, achieve greater inclusiveness, and contribute to the development of a positive team climate. Groves and Feyerherm [34] emphasize that CQ enables global leaders to balance process standardization and cultural sensitivity. According to them, CQ is a key component of global leadership competence and diversity management.

The most commonly used instrument for measuring CQ is the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), developed by Ang et al. [10], which includes four dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral. Van Dyne et al. [25] confirmed the validity of this instrument in different cultural and organizational contexts.

Presbitero [36] points out that the inclusion of CQ in HR practices - such as personnel selection, training and leadership development - significantly contributes to increasing team effectiveness and organizational innovation. Measuring and developing CQ becomes part of an integrated strategy for managing multicultural teams.

Although numerous studies confirm the positive effects of CQ, some authors warn of methodological limitations. Chen et al. [37] point out that the effects of CQ depend on context, including leadership style, type of task, and motivation of team members. Also, the predominant use of self-reports in measuring CQ raises issues of validity and subjective bias. Additionally, most research has been conducted in developed Western countries, while developing country contexts, such as virtual teams, remain relatively unexplored.

The literature review indicates that cultural intelligence is one of the key factors for optimizing performance in multicultural teams. CQ improves interpersonal communication, contributes to conflict resolution, building trust and team cohesion. However, further research is needed that will include new organizational formats (e.g. virtual teams) as well as more diverse cultural contexts.

The authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

5. Discussion

The results of the thematic synthesis clearly indicate that cultural intelligence is a central factor for improving performance in multicultural teams. Although the findings of the different authors are largely consistent, their interpretations raise important theoretical and practical questions that deserve further consideration.

The literature confirms that CQ functions as a dynamic ability rather than a static trait, which fits with the conceptualization of CQ as a “state-like” construct [35]. This opens up space for the theoretical positioning of CQ within models of organizational behavior that emphasize learnability and the development of employees' abilities. Also, the role of CQ in the context of team dynamics can be viewed through the prism of social capital – especially when considering the effects of CQ on building mutual trust, communication networks and shared norms in a team [35]. These dimensions point to the need to include CQ in broader models of collective efficacy and group cohesion, not just as an individual predictor of performance.

The practical value of CQ is reflected in its applicability at multiple levels of the organization - from personnel selection, through team development, to leadership. Its role is particularly significant in virtual teams and organizations operating globally, where the cultural context is often complex and opportunities for spontaneous social contact are limited [36]. Organizations that strategically develop CQ in their employees (e.g. through training, intercultural workshops and job rotation in different cultures) achieve not only better performance, but also higher levels of employee satisfaction and retention [34].

A certain degree of methodological homogeneity was observed in previous research. Most studies use quantitative methods and rely on participants' self-reports via the CQS scale, which raises the issue of validity and socially desirable responses [37]. The use of multiple data sources (e.g., peer ratings, leadership assessments, behavioral observations) and longitudinal designs would contribute to greater empirical grounding of the findings.

Another important limitation is the concentration of research in Western and Asian contexts. The contextual specificity of markets such as the countries of the Balkans, Eastern Europe or Latin America remains poorly covered. In this sense, contributions from the Republic of Serbia and the wider region can offer a new perspective, especially in sectors such as IT, health, higher education and international cooperation.

Future research should include:

- Comparative studies between traditional and virtual teams to determine the specific role of CQ in digital communication environments;
- Multilevel analysis that would include interactions between individual CQ and collective CQ (team CQ) in order to understand team synergy;
- Research in specific contexts such as public administration, health or education in developing countries, where cultural diversity is often not institutionalized;
- Qualitative research that would allow a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which CQ affects interpersonal relationships and team dynamics.

The thematic synthesis discussion confirms the multidimensional importance of cultural intelligence for the functioning and performance of multicultural teams. At the same time, it points to the need for methodological diversity and contextual sensitivity in future research. Cultural intelligence, if systematically developed and applied, has the potential to transform intercultural challenges into strategic advantages in modern organizations.

6. Conclusions

In today's globalized work environment, multicultural teams represent an increasingly present form of organizational structure. Although cultural diversity brings numerous advantages such as

creativity, innovation and a wider range of knowledge, it also brings challenges related to communication barriers, misunderstandings and conflicts. In this context, cultural intelligence (CQ) has proven to be a key competency for successful functioning and performance optimization in multicultural teams.

The thematic synthesis of existing literature indicates that CQ has a multiple role: it acts as a predictor of team effectiveness, facilitates intercultural communication and conflict resolution, influences leadership behavior and shapes organizational practices. The importance of the metacognitive and behavioral dimension of CQ in improving team cohesion and the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts is particularly emphasized.

Empirical research confirms that a higher level of CQ in team members and leaders positively correlates with better team outcomes - from the quality of communication and decision-making to innovation and goal achievement. Also, measuring CQ through validated instruments, such as the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), enables its integration into personnel selection, training and leadership development, which makes CQ practically relevant for human resource management.

However, a number of limitations have been observed in previous research: the dominance of Western contexts, reliance on self-assessments and insufficient representation of digital and virtual teams. Accordingly, future research should deepen the understanding of CQ in virtual and hybrid teams, as well as in developing country contexts, including Serbia and the Western Balkan region.

In conclusion, it can be argued that cultural intelligence is not only a theoretical construct, but also an applicable managerial skill of strategic importance for modern organizations that strive for intercultural competence, high performance and sustainable development in the global economy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declares no conflict of interest.

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