

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TEAM MANAGEMENT

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic caused organisational changes and forced greater flexibility in terms of jobs and the digitalisation of business processes, which has also affected team management in a business environment. The aim of this paper is to investigate and systematically show what changes in team management have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in computer programming. For this purpose, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with team leaders in a sample of companies from Varaždin County in Croatia. The research results reveal how SMEs responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These include, among others, reorganising team roles and responsibilities, ensuring timely and transparent communication, adapting employees to new ways of working, and strengthening organisational culture to preserve fundamental corporate values. The research also showed what the observed companies have done to put in place measures to resolve future crises and the fundamental positive changes in team management caused by the pandemic. Therefore, in addition to the scientific contribution, this paper can be of practical help to those facing the challenge of leading teams during challenging times, such as that of COVID-19.

Keywords:

team management,
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computer
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organisational
change,
team management
challenges

1 Introduction

Technology has a significant impact on all spheres of life and completely changed companies' business environments and behavioural procedures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology came into focus due to the need to organise work through virtual meetings, virtual teams and working from home. Today, virtual teams have become commonplace both because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the benefits they provide. During the pandemic, organisations worldwide were forced to move their businesses to a virtual environment. For many, working in a virtual environment was no longer a choice but an obligation. This situation also affected team management, which faced daily challenges.

There are many previous studies on team management, however, the majority of these studies were based on team management in 'normal' rather than extraordinary circumstances. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers began to address the changes and strategies in team management due to the new business circumstances. Stoker et al. (2019) state that crises can cause changes in leadership styles, Kaul et al. (2020) selected and summarised numerous characteristics and practices that effective leaders embody during a time of crisis, while Newman and Ford (2021) described five strategies that can benefit all organisations in the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this paper is to analyse how small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in computer programming responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and show what the observed companies have done to put in place measures to resolve future crises.

2 Team management in a contemporary business environment

Today, team management is an indispensable way of working globally. One of the reasons for this is that organisations increasingly recognise the importance of team management and its practical impact on organisational performance, thus ensuring 'the perfect running of the organisation' (Hasan and Hassan, 2021:56). Team management refers to the ability of a person or company to manage and coordinate a group of people performing specific tasks and includes collaboration, communication, goal setting and performance appraisal. In other words, team management represents the ability to spot problems and resolve conflicts in a team (Soni, 2020).

Team members communicate on important issues and ensure that an organisation's processes and units are coordinated and operate effectively. Effective team management positively contributes to creating value for the organisation, i.e. it creates added value in terms of what could not be achieved if managers acted as isolated individuals (Zamanov, 2020). In contrast, Natale et al. (1998) state that successful team management depends on the ability of a team leader to understand their team as a set of individuals dedicated to achieving a single goal.

2.1 Impact of business processes digitalisation on teamwork

The digitalisation of business processes in teamwork is changing the nature of collaboration in ways that have important implications for leadership. Research shows that the absence of traditional physical signs of dominance and status in virtual environments can foster more participatory relationships and that quality team management can also function remotely (Antonakis and Atwater, 2002). Technology has made it possible to start working from home, but for a long time, team leaders viewed such an opportunity with scepticism due to the inability to control the productivity of their employees at home (Faulds and Raju, 2021).

Through a review of previous research, Larson and DeChurch (2020) described four ways of using technology and what each of them means for team management: (1) technology as context – this view means that technology has fixed features and is separated from the team when they use it for interaction; (2) technology as sociomaterial – technology and teamwork are dependent: the team's intentions of doing something combine with the features of the technology features, thus enabling them to perform their tasks; (3) technology as a creation medium – means that teams can form within and outside of formal organisations and enable new opportunities for team management opportunities; (4) technology as a teammate – explores the ways that digital technologies can advance the point of fulfilling a distinct role on the team.

2.2 The challenges of leading virtual teams in terms of achieving organisational goals

The business transition to a virtual environment opens up new opportunities for organisations. One of the essential concepts when discussing doing business in a virtual environment is virtual teams, which provide specific benefits for both employees and employers (Maruping and Agarwal, 2004). Gibbs et al. (2008) state that employees can enjoy the flexibility of doing their work from home, which facilitates the balance of private and business life and potentially increases their job satisfaction. In contrast, employers can hire professionals from all over the world. Further increases can be expected in the use of virtual teams due to cost reductions, increased global integration and large-scale knowledge sharing (Zander et al., 2013).

Newman et al. (2020) explored how virtual team members' perceptions of their leaders practical communication tools and techniques affect the outcomes of team performance. The results of their research showed, among others, the following: (1) when team members believe that their team leader uses communication techniques and tools effectively, then they perceive the tremendous success of teamwork; (2) when there is a higher level of trust in the team leader, then the success of the team itself is higher; (3) the existence of a gap between the perception of team leader efficiency, their perception of team performance outcomes, and the performance organisations (Newman et al., 2020).

Analysing strategies for building an efficient virtual team, Ford et al. (2017) state that in order to strengthen trust in a team leader, it is crucial to acquire and strengthen skills related to team goal setting, rewarding team members, communication, team building, conflict resolution, acquiring team collaboration skills and ensuring that none of the team members feel isolated. Similarly, Lukić et al. (2020) state that some of the critical problems of virtual teams are the establishment of a new model of functioning and communication, initial misunderstandings between team members, lack of equipment needed for effective team functioning, communication problems, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, nervousness and panic. As virtual teams have become commonplace today, companies are facing various virtual team challenges.

2.3 Changes in team management due to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible to reinvent the future of work and create opportunities for companies to look at things differently. This crisis also greatly affected team management, which faces various daily changes. Through a review of previous research, Stoker et al. (2019) state that crises can cause changes in leadership styles, therefore companies can expect to be better prepared if they invest adequately in professional development. Depending on employees' skills and previous experience, some companies faced challenges, and it took them a long time to adapt their business to the online environment (Stoker et al., 2019). Hasan et al. (2021) state that the key to a company's survival during a pandemic is proper training and upgrading workers' skills.

Additionally, Kaul et al. (2020) described the essential principles of leadership during a crisis: communication, a realistic view of the current situation and an optimistic view of the future, a focus on mission and corporate values, decision-making in an unstable environment, long-term and short-term planning, participation with purpose and humility, levelling the leadership structure, and openness. They state that it is crucial to communicate clearly and consistently with the team about the current crisis and provide assurance that they have all the necessary resources to deal with everyday threats (Kaul et al., 2020). Furthermore, a good team leader should: (1) be flexible and change their decisions according to the new information that has arrived, (2) make difficult decisions focusing on achieving long-term goals, (3) collect feedback from associates for better decision-making, and (4) cultivate a sense of community and be given the freedom to query questions and listen to the different opinions of its members (Kaul et al., 2020).

Researchers began to suggest strategies for changes in team management. Newman and Ford (2021) introduced five strategies that can benefit all organisations currently facing the challenge of team leadership due to the COVID-19 pandemic: establish and explain the new reality, sustain the corporate culture and strengthen the perception of leader trustworthiness, upgrade leadership communication practices and techniques to inform virtual employees better, encourage shared leadership among team members, and create and periodically perform alignment audits to ensure virtual employees are aligned with the organisation's cultural values, including its commitment to mission. Their five strategies are just one of several opportunities

available to team leaders in times of the pandemic and crisis and the current business circumstances.

3 How small companies from the computer programming field adapted their teams in the COVID-19 era: evidence from Croatia

3.1 Research methodology

The aim of this research is to determine what changes in team management have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic in SMEs engaged in computer programming in Varaždin County in Croatia. In-depth, half-structured interviews with team leaders in four purposely chosen small companies were held.

3.2 Research results and discussion

The research results showed no significant job changes or needs for reorganisation for most companies due to the nature of work in the industry – they have been working remotely for years. There was a reorganisation at the vertical and horizontal level of the organisation – team leaders take care of their team development and level of education (horizontal) and communicate with HR if they notice less motivation or problems with employees (vertical). Everyone has a role to play in communicating with other people, and short meetings are held daily at the vertical and horizontal levels. There is a lot of help among employees.

Some of the typical problems faced by team management in the analysed companies during the COVID-19 pandemic are as follows:

- a lower level of correspondence with team members when working from home
- timely and transparent communication, especially when some team members are working from home while some are in the company office
- complex maintenance of well-established ways of working and organisational culture in general
- employee alienation and a kind of de-socialisation
- more complex and often untimely giving of feedback to employees

- technical problems and coordination of information transfer that required more time
- difficult access to more withdrawn team members
- fewer employees use the opportunity to present their initiatives and proposals, and the most common reasons are fear and thinking that they have nothing to contribute

When comparing team leaders' answers, there are many similarities since they are in the same business industry. Differences appeared in how they communicate with their teams, the measures they implemented to facilitate adaptation to remote work, and the initiatives implemented for a feeling of purpose. Thus, below the differences are elaborated through the respondents' answers.

The method of communication – The first team leader said they use *Slack* and *Google Meet* for communication purposes and do not panic when someone does not answer immediately. The second team leader said they communicate using *Microsoft Teams* and have daily meetings with their team members. In addition, they send out weekly newsletters so employees are kept up to date on the strategic decisions and other company matters. The third team leader confirmed the use of different collaboration tools for virtual meetings. The last team leader explained their ticketing system, with clearly dedicated tasks among different team members. They also communicate their location statuses, so everyone is informed about the whereabouts of each team member, and use e-mail, *Skype* and *Zoom*. Finally, all companies educated employees about the use of remote working tools, and employees received all the necessary equipment to enable them to working from home that they may not have had prior to the pandemic, and companies were equipped with the necessary equipment for conducting remote meetings.

The measures implemented for facilitating adaptation to the remote work – The first team leader explained that they did not implement any new measures since they worked remotely prior to the pandemic. The second team leader said they started to care a lot more about the mental state of employees, so they implemented regular informal calls whereby employees could discuss their concerns and have the support they needed for all the work they were assigned. The third team leader

pointed out that they only implemented the government's suggested measures and not anything else. The last team leader explained how they enabled greater flexibility so team members could choose their workplace and ease the adjustment to new ways of working.

The initiatives are implemented for a greater sense of purpose in work – The first team leader elaborated on how they use a monthly newsletter to transparently explain the tasks solved, the state of the progress, and what employees can expect in the upcoming period. The second team leader elaborated on the career opportunities available to employees, and they implemented career planning, regular feedback and soft skills workshops. The third team leader explained how they think employees feel a sense of purpose in their work by completing their tasks, and they implemented a new scheme whereby 'employee of the month' is chosen. The last team leader said they implemented employee appraisals, which leads to inner satisfaction if the review is positive. Additionally, they enabled flexible work hours and higher salaries.

4 Conclusion

This paper focused on the issues that COVID-19 caused for team management – reorganising team roles and responsibilities, ensuring timely and transparent communication, adapting employees to new ways of working and strengthening organisational culture to preserve their values. In order to discover the aforementioned issues, in-depth interviews were conducted with team leaders. The interviewees were from SMEs engaged in computer programming from Varaždin County in Croatia.

The research results showed which issues arose in the business area when team leaders managed their members remotely, even prior to the COVID-19 era. The authors of this paper described some ideas that managers can use to better manage their team members. Since COVID-19 has had numerous consequences on mental health, team leaders are responsible for noticing changes in their employees' behaviour, thus daily or weekly meetings have been implemented to keep team members in the loop. Additionally, team leaders can use specific collaboration tools and offer their employees greater flexibility in their work schedules (either by enabling them to work remotely or allowing them to work when it is convenient).

They can start sending newsletters to strengthen the relationship with their employees.

The biggest drawback of the research is the small sample. For any future research conducted in the area of team management, researchers should consider including some other business areas (for example, clothes manufacturing or commerce). There is a possibility that other changes occurred in team management, therefore there is room for more outstanding scientific contributions. This paper can help team managers implement some new ideas into their teams.

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