

TEAM MANAGEMENT IN POST PANDEMIC TIMES IN HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare organizations have been reshaped in terms of team management following the challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and even more after it. The use of remote work and the transformation of traditional teams into virtual teams are more present than before. The management of virtual teams in healthcare organizations has certain particularities compared to those in traditional teams, being influenced by the conditions of the environment in which the activity is carried out, the VUCA type environment, but also by the characteristics of the team and the type of managers. The analysis of differences allows us to adapt the management style according to the challenges and obstacles we encounter in these organizations, but also to identify success factors that lead to team performance and the motivation of its members. The theoretical concepts support our research through the interview method and the obtained data, in turn, support the theoretical concepts. The conclusions obtained are beneficial and useful to virtual team managers in healthcare organizations and confirm that there are peculiarities of virtual team management in these types of organizations.

KEYWORDS: *manager, motivation, performance, virtual team, VUCA.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the business environment in ways unknown and unexpected at the moment of the year 2019; the moment when healthcare organizations, as well as other business organizations, had a specific structure, with traditional teams operating in the office / on site / hospital. The mobility restriction and the measures for keeping distance in order to avoid the spread of the coronavirus force the organization to find remote ways to perform the daily activities of the teams and the traditional teams had been transformed into virtual ones.

At first sight, we could say that virtual teams are similar to traditional ones, they are also made up of people who have a common goal and different ways and activities they undertake to achieve that goal. But, if we carefully observe such teams, those in the virtual environment also have certain differences from the traditional ones, the obvious being the physical distance between the team members, who may be in different cities or even countries.

As a result of globalization, many fields of activity started using virtual teams and had to find the best organizational methods for these teams to function and achieve the desired results. Moreover, at the head of a team and responsible for its success or failure is the manager. They found that adaptations of the traditional management style are needed to create, maintain and grow a successful virtual team.

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The business environment has been shaped and changed by the appearance of the VUCA type environment, characterized by rapid changes and a high degree of uncertainty that has an impact on the way the activity is carried out and the results obtained in this type of environment. A case study conducted by two American researchers, James R. Johnson (Purdue University) and Laurel Jeris (Northern Illinois University) (2004) on three organizations focused to seek answer to the following question: *From the perspective of the leader and team members, what are the most effective and ineffective leadership behaviors, competencies, skills, and attributes found in virtual teams?* Among the conclusions obtained from this research, the most important particularity is communication. Also, an important conclusion is that understanding of this virtual team management phenomenon is in its infancy and that further research and observations are needed.

Starting from the theoretical concepts of management, types of managers, the team, the VUCA environment, we want to find out what happens in healthcare organizations that are part of the VUCA environment through interview-based research. We want to find out if there are any peculiarities of virtual team managers in this field. This research is topical given the importance of this sector and the challenges of recent years.

We will review the theoretical framework regarding the management of a team, with key aspects for the manager and the team, as well as differences between traditional and virtual ones, the VUCA environment, the effect of COVID-19 on virtual teams and clinical research organizations. Our research on managers will check if the theoretical framework is encountered in the working organizations. The conclusions will address potential solutions to our research results.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 General concepts with respect to the management of a team

The success of an organization is influenced by the organization's products and services, but at the same time, the management of that organization, the characteristics of the manager, and his team also play important and decisive roles. The leader of a team in the organization is the *manager*, the person who "exercises management functions by virtue of the objectives, tasks, skills and responsibilities specific to the position he occupies" (Burduş & Popa, 2018, p. 77). The functions of management are: *provision, organization, coordination, motivation and control-evaluation* (Burduş & Popa, 2018, p.210). The manager is involved in all these functions. However, as we will see in the following classifications, there are different types of managers, in which different weights of each management function can be found, which will give a certain typology and a certain behavior in relation to the team.

Regarding a manager's team, Arădăvoaice (2008, p. 9) defines it as "a group of people who, under the leadership of a boss, perform, at the same time, a common work or action".

The characteristics of a successful team (Arădăvoaice, 2008, p. 9) are as follows.

- the existence of common objectives defined according to SMART type requirements (Arădăvoaice, 2008, pp. 248-249) (Specific, Measurable, Accessible, Relevant and Time-bound),
- system of norms, principles and ethical values shared by all members,
- precise responsibilities and clear attributions,
- well-defined roles.
- qualities such as trust, mutual respect and active cooperation,
- open and honest communication,
- reward system for individual and team results.

According to Burduş & Popa (2018, pp. 81-83), the typology of managers refers to "the set of main characteristics related to the qualities, knowledge and skills of a category of managers, which gives them the same approach to the basic aspects of management processes". There are a multitude of classifications of the types of managers, starting from their typology (introvert/extrovert), to the

ratio between their native talent and their acquired competence (Puiu, 2011, p. 7) (the leading manager, the constructive manager, the destructive manager, the innovative manager), or depending on the leader-subordinate relationship (Puiu, 2011, p. 8) (autocratic leaders, democratic leaders, neutral leaders, situational leaders).

The global consulting firm Gartner (Wall Street, 2022) surveyed 5000 managers globally from different fields and obtained a classification with four types of managers (the teacher-type manager, the manager who controls everything, the manager who always encourages – "puppet", the liaison manager).

The classification we chose for this paper is the one that uses the authority level of managers, according to Burduş and Popa (2018, p. 82-83):

- *participative* – characterized by a manager with thorough training in the field, who approaches problems openly and communicates easily and tactfully, uses delegation and creates a work climate that encourages the development of team members;
- *authoritarian* – characterized by the importance of hierarchical relationships of subordination, the reduced use of delegation and the creation of a hostile work environment that discourages the development of team members as a result of the manager's commanding attitude;
- *participative-authoritarian* – characterized by the presence of the characteristics of the participative and authoritarian manager in equal proportions.

In today's organizations, it is considered that for a team to work under conditions of optimal effectiveness, the ideal number of members is between 6 and 12, according to Hunsaker and Hunsaker (2015, p. 56). The manager is the one who chooses the composition of the team based on the criteria listed above and according to the needs of the organization. The following types of team can be found in today's organizations (BusinessAcademy, n.d.):

- *management teams*: composed of management teams (executive committees, management boards, upper and middle management committees) with the role of solving problems in the organization and deciding its strategy;
- *project teams*: have a specific character and a temporary existence, depending on the duration of the project for which they are created and its members can be from several departments of the organization, such as the financial, human resources, marketing, or production department, depending on the nature and requirements of the project;
- *quality circles*: formed of groups of 8-10 workers who have meetings outside working hours with the aim of improving the quality of products and services. The concept is mostly found in Japan and originated in the USA;
- *work teams*: formed when necessary and include experts from different departments of the organization with the aim of solving a specific problem in the organization;
- *virtual teams*: teams that use computer technology to connect members of the organization located in different cities/countries, with the aim of achieving a common goal. Collaboration within the team is done online and tools such as tele or web conferences, emails, and online collaboration platforms are used.

According to Turner and Simister (2004, p. 671), for teamwork to be carried out in good conditions, it is necessary to meet conditions such as carefully analyzing the size, purpose and concrete objectives of the team, analysis of the composition of the team from the point of view of the skills of its members and their responsibility regarding the tasks assigned within the team, how to perform the team's tasks, taking responsibility for the team's performance, discipline of activities and finding a common way to approach problems.

2.2 Managing traditional and virtual teams

In recent years, organizations have wanted to expand to other markets outside of the country in which they operate, and thus multinational companies have appeared. In these companies, the teams working together are virtual teams, which retain the characteristics of a traditional team, but they also have a number of differences (Chicoş, 2019):

- team members are in different cities/countries – possibly even in different time zones;
- communication is done through means such as: phone, email, internet (with reduced or even non-existent face-to-face meetings);
- language used in communication is not necessarily the native language, which can lead to communication problems.

For a successful collaboration, within such a team, it is necessary to consider a high degree of trust between team members, the existence and use of high-performance technologies (email, web, applications), open and continuous communication with a focus on feedback and team support, correct establishment of the team's objectives, and correct team management.

Since the conditions of existence of the virtual team are different from those of a traditional team, the management of this team must also be adapted accordingly. Thus, the manager contributes to the achievement of the team's performance and can increase the team's success through various actions.

As a result of the physical distance between the team members, communication problems may arise, and the appearance of conflicts due to the reduced visibility of the degree of involvement of the team members. All the distance can give a sense of ambiguity about the role of each team member and over time can lead to a feeling of lack of team cohesion, and, ultimately, it will lead to the team's failure to achieve its intended goals and to underperformance or not in line with the team's goals. These can contribute to a decrease in the motivation of team members. Ted Pink (cited by Bradley, 2021) considers three important points for maintaining high motivation: autonomy (internal desire to act), mastery and purpose. Motivation can be maintained in the team through the use of rewards (such as salary increases, bonuses, gift cards) and recognition of team members (email/letter of appreciation or verbally in team meetings).

Therefore, the role of the manager of a virtual team becomes vital in the success of a virtual team. In addition to the aspects related to communication, motivation and performance, the manager must also consider the ways of controlling activities and feedback (Roman, 2021). The management style will need to be adapted accordingly to hold each team member accountable and avoid team micromanagement (excessive manager control, such as the authoritarian manager).

Performance

According to Burduş and Popa (2018, p. 351), we can say that performance means the degree to which a member of the team or organization contributes to the achievement of the objectives set within them. There are also factors that can influence it, such as "the skills and abilities of the employee, the understanding of the task or the chance" (Burduş et Popa, 2018, p. 351). Apart from these factors, the manager plays an important role in supporting the performance of the employee or team by creating a work climate with an emphasis on mutual trust and open communication (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2015, p. 54).

Furthermore, Tanculescu (2016) mentions an interesting performance model proposed by Campbell, which presents the following factors:

- the efficiency specifically correlated with the position occupied;
- nonspecifically correlated efficiency with the job held;
- written and oral communication;
- demonstration of effort;
- maintaining personal discipline;

- facilitating the performance of the team and its counterparts;
- supervision and leadership (management);
- management and administration.

This model can also be applied to virtual teams, adapting the processes of communication, motivation and performance according to the characteristics of the individual, the team and the organization, these being the focus of the manager's concerns.

Motivation

We hear more and more often that behind the success/performance of an employee or team, there is motivation, which we can define according to Burduş and Popa (2018, p. 345), in Atkinson's words, as "the immediate influence manifested, on the direction, intensity and persistence of the action". According to Burduş and Popa (2018, p. 346), motivation is an activity in itself with the aim of influencing a person to channel his efforts in the act of work. Therefore, we can identify the following motivation characteristics (Burduş and Popa, 2018, pp. 347-348): effort, perseverance, the direction of the applied effort and the organization's objectives.

In addition, motivation is made up of reasons and incentives (Burduş & Popa, 2018, p. 348), and managers must carefully analyze these components to achieve the desired effects. To be able to influence a team member to do a certain activity, according to Burduş and Popa (2018, p. 349), the manager will take into account the intrinsic motivation that arises from the direct relationship between the employee and the act of work and the extrinsic one that arises from outside the individual, being able to be imposed by the organization.

There are two types of motivation (Burduş & Popa, 2018, p. 350): positive, based on rewards, and negative, based on sanctions, and the use of one of them must be carefully chosen by the manager, depending on the desired results.

2.3 Managing Virtual Teams in Healthcare Organizations

Considerations about Clinical Research Organizations

Healthcare organizations include clinical research organizations (Vial, 2022) that operate in life sciences/biosciences and provide support to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies and medical devices in the form of outsourced research services on a contract basis. An important part of these services consists of clinical trial management services through which certain drugs of interest to the pharmaceutical company are analyzed and data are collected from the patients included in the study on the basis of which the drug may or may not reach pharmacies. The duration of this process is approximately 15 years (Moore et.al., 2020) and the costs can reach millions of euros.

The main goals of a clinical research organization are to improve study efficiency and reduce costs for pharmaceutical companies. Each pharmaceutical company may have several drugs that it wants to analyze through clinical trials and these may be from different therapeutic areas (oncology, diabetes, dermatology, etc.) and there may be several studies running in parallel by the same pharmaceutical company in a clinical research organization. These research organizations operate in a VUCA environment, are multinational companies, and use virtual teams in their clinical research activities.

The VUCA environment of clinical research organizations

The acronym VUCA was adopted in the business environment as a takeover from the language of the US military in the late 1980s (Mahr, 2022), where it was used to describe the challenges of the post-Cold War leadership style:

- Volatility – volatility as a result of the speed with which things change in the organization/business environment/world.

- Uncertainty – uncertainty as a result of the difficulty in making future predictions/planning and estimations.
- Complexity – complexity as a result of the increase in the number of factors that must be taken into account at the time of a team/organizational decision.
- Ambiguity – ambiguity as a result of the above.

Today, this term is used in a multitude of fields that are characterized by the above, such as the global economy, the political environment, or the stock market. The VUCA environment is characterized by constant change and unpredictability/uncertainty, which leads to the adaptation of the management style to cope with this challenging environment.

Some of the methods used by managers to navigate this environment are (Mahr, 2022): (1) to be aware of what is happening in the environment of the organization; (2) developing strong collaborative relationships with team members and (3) clear communication. In addition, managers can build an action plan to respond to the challenges of the VUCA environment also known as VUCA (Chiratcu, 2020): vision, understanding, clarity and Agility.

As change is the only constant in this world, managers must constantly change/adapt their management style to face contemporary challenges and be able to lead the team to achieve the common goal.

2.4 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on virtual teams

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020 and has not yet been declared over, has forced organizations to significantly change the way they conduct their activities by switching to working from home in industries where this was possible. Moreover, the new organizational arrangements imposed certain changes in managerial process (Popa et al., 2022) and outlined the need for sustainable development strategies (Ștefan & Breazu, 2022). Nevertheless, the upward concerns on healthcare competitiveness in pandemic conditions, the subject being increasingly addressed by researchers around the world (Ștefan & Breazu, 2022).

In terms of clinical research organizations, most of the teams were already working virtually, so the transition was made naturally and without notable changes, at least in the way work activities were organized. Instead, what was different and led to certain obstacles in the activity was the generalized feeling of insecurity, as well as the feeling of loneliness that arose as a result of the restrictions given by the authorities. At the same time, employees had to adapt to working from home and find ways to carry out their work activities in an environment that was not adapted and which, in some cases, was divided between the school/kindergarten activities of children or the online work activities of the life partner (Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

Following the analyzes carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chamakiotis, Panteli and Davison, (2021) identified four directions for virtual team managers to follow: (1) digital well-being; (2) building relationships, developing trust and engagement; (3) maintaining a balance between professional and personal life (work-life balance) and (4) innovation and creative performance. The careful analysis of these directions by managers leads to finding new solutions for the team's activities, as well as counteracting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as chronic fatigue syndrome (burnout) (ReginaMaria, n.d.).

3. Research methodology

The management of a virtual team is different from that of a traditional team. Furthermore, in the case of a clinical trial organization operating in a VUCA environment, managers must demonstrate greater flexibility in managing the challenges of daily activities. This research aims to find out the success factors and obstacles encountered by the virtual team in healthcare/clinical research organizations.

The research method used for this case study is the semi-structured interview (Ştefan et al., 2021, pp. 141-153) with six open questions, individually, by telephone. The sample used for the analysis consists of tree virtual team managers working in various clinical research organizations, with more than two years of managerial experience in the field of healthcare organizations and experience in managing virtual teams in this field. The interviews were conducted between 1 and 4 April 2023, with a duration of approximately 10-15 minutes each. Due to confidentiality reasons, the identity of the managers cannot be revealed, and they will be identified as Manager 1, Manager 2 and Manager 3.

4. RESULTS

The interviews responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview answers

No.	Question	Manager 1	Manager 2	Manager 3
1	How long have you been managing virtual teams?	6 years and 2 months	2 years and 3 months	5 years
2	How many virtual teams have you managed during this time?	15	6	12
3	What is the composition of a team (on average)?	5-7 members	3-5 members	6-8 members
4	What are the success factors that you use in your team?	Extended communication Regular training Team cohesion.	Frequent meetings Open communication Constant training on work activities	Celebrating results Building a strong team Fair and honest communication.
5	What are the obstacles identified within your team?	Communication difficulties due to the different levels of experience of the team members Language barriers Frequent changes in processes and project activities	Time zones differences Different understanding of an activity by team members Too much information received by the team and inadequate prioritization of work tasks	Communication problems between team members as a result of different prioritization of the same work task Decreased motivation of team members at times of change in the organization
6	What recommendations / changes have you identified during this period in the management of your team?	The need for more frequent and open communications (both team and 1:1) Scheduling short informal virtual meetings (10-15 minutes) to talk casually with team members about non-work-related topics	A more open and extensive communication from the manager to the team regarding the priorities of the next period	Celebrating results both with the team and at the individual level Clear communication of objectives and expected resolution timelines. Check in frequently (intermediate status of work tasks) to identify any difficulties or delays

Source: Answers transcribed by the interviewer

According to the answers received from the three interviewed managers, we can see that their seniority as a manager of virtual teams is in the range of two-six years and the number of managed virtual teams is between six and 15, which shows us that they have experience in managing this type of team. In this healthcare organization, the experience of managers can vary, based on internal information, due to the characteristics of each department and due to the VUCA environment, especially during the restrictions and uncertainty. Post-pandemic, the organization has expanded due to increase in business, and more managers have been added to the organization, either through internal promotion to management role of employees, who are now learning how to manage a team, or external hiring of managers with different degrees of experience. This aspect can be further

discussed, as team performance can be driven in a positive or negative way based on the manager's skills and way of leading the team. Furthermore, the size of the teams is between three and eight people, which tells us a relatively balanced distribution, according to the theoretical recommendations. An additional analysis could be done by Manager 2 who has between three and five people in the team, regarding the volume of activities of the team members, to avoid overloading them, which can lead to chronic fatigue or burnout syndrome over time (Regina Maria, n.d.), increasingly present in organizations of this type. In this healthcare organization, the size of the teams can vary, according to internal information, due to the characteristics of each department. In the teams analyzed, the teams are average in terms of number of team members and the results may be different in bigger or smaller teams, depending on their setup. This aspect should be taken into consideration when analyzing the performance of the team is done, as well as motivation of the team members. The VUCA environment can influence team performance, as well as development of burnout syndrome over time, due to frequent changes and uncertainty present in the organization. Oleksa-Marewska and Tokar (2022) researched this topic and the results showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare sector was affected by depression, anxiety, burnout, and other psychological distress. The impact of these health issues is not fully known at this stage, as more research would need to be carried out in time to assess the way employees in healthcare have been affected and are still affected, since there are still cases of COVID-19 even in 2023.

The answer to question 4 indicates the success factors used by the three managers, and they are present in all teams: communication, instruction/training, building a strong team. Regarding the answer received from Manager 2, it is to be analyzed whether the frequent meetings produce the desired long-term effects and do not actually indicate the tendency of the manager to control the activities in the smallest details, known as micromanagement (Bădoiu, 2022), a characteristic of the authoritarian type of manager. Research conducted by Verbarg, Bosch-Sijtsema and Vartiainen (2012) shows that clear communication leads to faster project conduct and also increases the value of accomplishment, and all these make the success of a virtual team. The restrictions and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption in communication, delay in delivering the results needed in the projects, and decreased the value of accomplishment. The managers now need to work again on building these characteristics, to strengthen the teams, and to convey them again in successful teams.

Question 5 shows us the obstacles encountered by managers, such as: language barriers, time zone differences, frequent changes in processes and activities, changes that cause a large amount of information and different understanding of activities, all of which led to communication problems and decreased motivation of team members. All the obstacles identified are characteristics of the VUCA environment, specific to this type of organization. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the pressure of the VUCA environment and the pressure on the performance and motivation and managers had to deal with these situations based on their experience and the support received from the organization. The obstacles noted are still present in the teams, as the virtual environment will continue to have language barriers, time zone differences and frequent changes. But a team equipped with the tools and correct mindset, as well as strong manager support, will be able to overcome these and perform the activities needed in the projects assigned.

The last question shows us the managers' interest in solving the obstacles identified in question 5, so each of them prepared their own VUCA (Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Agility) response to the VUCA environment, by using different methods and tools with focus on communication and team cohesion, such as short informal or check-in meetings to discuss the status of work tasks and clarify any questions, as well as celebrating team and individual results, which leads to retention and increased motivation of team members, solving communication problems and achieving the proposed objectives. The role of the manager is instrumental for the success of the team, and a manager genuinely interested in the team, and strongly anchored in the organization and working environment, can support, motivate, and grow the team, based on the organizational priorities, as

well as individual priorities of the team members. Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar (2022) propose a leadership model in healthcare that can support their team members for success, and this model includes the competencies and behavioral strategies of the managers: mission, involvement, adaptability and consistency. Also, there are core remote competencies that are needed for the team members: communication skills, credibility, desire for self-development and digital readiness. The model can be further analyzed in the organization to verify if it can be implemented and what are the changes or challenges that the organization, managers and team members can identify.

Based on the information received by the interviewer during the interview, we observe that the analyzed organizations present characteristics of the VUCA environment and that the managers encountered the mentioned obstacles within the virtual teams, from the language barrier to communication problems and affecting the motivation of team members in moments of uncertainty generated by frequent changes in organizations. Managers also looked for solutions to solve the above obstacles to be able to motivate the team and complete the tasks assigned to the teams.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Starting from the theoretical concepts of management, types of managers, the team, the VUCA environment, we want to find out what happens in healthcare organizations that are part of the VUCA environment through interview-based research. We want to find out if there are any peculiarities of virtual team managers in this field. This research is of interest given the importance of this sector and the challenges of recent years.

Through the research conducted and the review of the literature, we identified several key ideas when referring to virtual teams and their managers in healthcare organizations that are in the VUCA environment. The research methodology used is the semi-structured interview addressed to three managers of healthcare organization with the purpose of identifying the success factors and obstacles encountered by the managers in their virtual teams. Virtual teams are a reality of the business environment of this period, and as a result of globalization, their presence and impact on the performance of an organization will be felt strongly and with an increasing trend.

The VUCA environment and the challenges of this type of environment force managers and organizations to take a number of measures to counter its effect, such as clear communication, developing a strong team and the need to be aware of what is happening in the organization's environment. We have also identified that team motivation, clear communication of objectives and expected resolution deadlines, as well as celebrating results alongside informal team communication moments, can ensure team success in a VUCA environment. These constitute particularities of the management of virtual teams in the analyzed healthcare organizations. The importance of success factors and obstacles in team performance and motivation can be used as a starting point in further discussions about team management after the pandemic. Organizations can conduct extensive research to identify means of support for their virtual teams, in order to increase performance and motivation of the individuals. The results can be used by HR departments and managers, as well as trainers that can customize internal training for soft skills like communication, working in a team, digital readiness, performance and motivation.

It is interesting to see what will happen in this area in the coming years, given the challenges of the VUCA environment and those of a virtual team. Also, future research will focus on this type of teams and the particularities of managing these teams, as a result of their expansion, there is the possibility of exceeding the share of traditional teams in certain organizations.

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