Czech University of Life Sciences

Faculty of Economics and Management

Department of Management

Extended Abstract of Master Thesis

Challenges in the workplace: Conflicts in virtual teams

Alina Skrypka

Abstract

The main objective of this diploma thesis is to make a research about the conflict situations in virtual teams and analyze if there are important differences in types and reasons for conflict management between members of virtual teams and traditional (local) teams, as well as to identify the role and approaches of the manager in these conflicts. In addition, the objective of the thesis is to refer to the identified reasons for the conflicts and suggest the possible directions of their resolutions based on the reviewed literature and own research. The first part of the thesis, literature overview, provides a summary of the analyzed journals, web resources and materials from libraries on the topic of conflict, virtual teams, traditional teams and conflict resolution. The methodology of the second part, own research, is based on the questionnaires provided to the members of a virtual team and a semi-structured interview with a manager of this team. Questionnaires were filled out by regular employees and members of virtual teams of the companies in the sphere of information technologies. Based on the survey results evaluation recommendations to improve conflict management in virtual teams were proposed.

Keywords: Conflict, virtual team, questionnaire, teamwork, conflict resolution, interview, distributed teams, conflict management, online communication.

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je analyzovat konfliktní situace ve virtuálních skupinách a zkoumat, zda existují významné rozdíly v typech a důvodech konfliktů mezi virtuálními týmy a tradičními týmy, a také identifikovat roli manažera v takových situacích a jeho přístupy k řešení konfliktů. Dalším cílem diplomové práce je odkázat na zjištěné důvody konfliktu a navrhnout jejich možné řešení vycházející z teoretické části a vlastního výzkumu. První část práce, představuje přehled témat konfliktu, virtuálních týmů, tradičních týmů a řešení konfliktů na základě odborné literatury, analyzovaných časopisů, webových zdrojů a materiálů z knihoven. Metodika druhé části, vlastní výzkum, je založena na dotaznících poskytnutých členům virtuálního týmu a polo strukturovaného rozhovoru s manažerem tohoto týmu. Dotazníky vyplnili běžní zaměstnanci a členové virtuálních týmů firem v oblasti informačních technologií. Na základě výsledků průzkumu byla navržena doporučení pro hodnocení zlepšení řízení konfliktů ve virtuálních týmech.

Klíčová slova: konflikt, virtuální tým, dotazník, týmová práce, řešení konfliktů, rozhovor, rozdělení týmů, řízení konfliktů, on-line komunikace.

In the age of globalization and fast technology development, the companies start to utilize the concept of virtual teams more and more often. It does not come with a surprise considering the numerous benefits connected with the application of this approach. However, virtual teams have disadvantages as well that may lead to the difficulties, misunderstandings and conflicts between their members.

Objectives

The aim of this thesis is to analyze conflict situations in virtual teams and examine if there are significant differences in types and reasons for conflicts between members of virtual teams and traditional (local) teams. Moreover, the aim includes the identification of conflict solutions and the role of the manager in such situations. In addition, the objective of the thesis is to refer to the identified reasons for the conflicts and suggest the possible directions of their resolutions based on the reviewed literature and own research.

The following research questions were formulated in order to achieve the aim:

1. Do employees face more conflicts with virtual team members compared to local team members?

2. What are the main reasons for conflicts in virtual teams with online members?

3. Are there any differences between reasons for conflicts in traditional teams and virtual teams?

4. What are the main solutions for virtual team conflicts suggested by their managers or team leaders?

Methodology

The first part of the thesis provides a summary of relevant professional resources such as analyzed journals, books and articles from web resources and libraries on the topic of conflict, virtual teams, traditional teams and conflict resolution.

The methodology of the second part, own research, is based on the questionnaires provided to the members of a virtual team and a semi-structured interview with a manager of this team. The questionnaire included 11 multiple choice questions and interviews included from 5 to 7 questions. The total number of respondents is 52.

The research focused on five teams that include both local members and virtual team members. All the companies are working in the IT sphere, in particular, digital marketing, digital insurance, and IT services. The teams are physically located in the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are Hewlett Packard Enterprise, DXC Technology, Grid Dynamics, Dinghy, and Digital Marketing d.o.o.

The data received from the research were carefully analyzed and described. The outcomes and analysis were used to respond to the main research questions stated in the objectives of the thesis.

According to the analysis based on the questionnaire data, it is not enough evidence to confirm that employees face more conflicts with virtual team members compared to local team members.

The correlation coefficient was calculated to analyze if there is a correlation between the working period and the frequency of conflicts the team members face. The results showed a very weak level of correlation.

According to the results, the respondents who have the most frequent conflicts are male in the age group of 21-30 years. At the same time, female representatives in the age group of 21-30 years prevail among those who have chosen "once per week" and "2-3 times per week" conflict frequency. As for the age group of 30-40 years old, most of them have chosen either "never" or "once per month" conflict frequency. Also, all the respondents with the working period of more than 4 years replied that they have conflict frequency once per month. Moreover, those who replied "Never" are mostly represented by those who are working in a company for either less than 1 year or 1-2 years.

As for the conflict influence on the everyday working life of the respondents, all respondents who work more than 4 years have chosen "medium influence" option. Also, female employees, as well as those who work less than 1 year, prevail among those who replied "higher than medium influence" and "strong influence". Male employees prevail among those who replied "lower than medium influence" or "medium influence".

There are differences present in the reasons for the conflicts between local team members and virtual team members. The main reasons for the distributed members are: an online character of communication, incompetence, language issues, time incompatibility and cultural differences. As for the local team members, they are: injustice, unfairness, inequality, incompetence, time incompatibility, an online character of communication and violation, insult. It can be concluded from the reasons mentioned above that there are both similar and different reasons for conflict between virtual team members and local team members.

As for the solutions, it was found that in most of the cases virtual team leaders use the approaches based on the conflict types their team is facing and their previous experience. The main approaches are:

1. Analysis of the relationships and communication in the team;

2. Creation of a virtual site as the group's essential point of convergence and/or an internal social network;

3. Encouraging employees to keep a constant flow of communication and share knowledge;

4. Encouraging team to have activities outside the project;

5. Introducing the habit of celebrations as a team;

6. Setting of clear objectives and orientations for each of the member and the team as a whole;

7. Encouraging the team members' participation in setting the overall strategy;

8. Constantly devoting time for team building;

9. Providing constant feedback about team performance.

Implementation of the advice and approaches mentioned above should help in conflict prevention and resolution among virtual team members.

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