

Towards a more balanced treatment of culture in international business using an ethnographic design: a multinational family business case study

Against
negative
cultural bias

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Abstract

Purpose – The negative cultural bias vis-à-vis international business and cross-cultural management has been duly acknowledged, necessitating recommendations towards investigating its positive effects. Methodologically, quantitative research clearly predominates, and there have been calls for alternative approaches. Thus, this conceptual paper addresses the research gap (methodological and thematic) by investigating if multicultural teams can be an essential part of the global workforce and whether positive effects exist regarding dynamic capabilities, learning and knowledge transfer.

Design/methodology/approach – The underlying ethnographic research design enabled exploring within the embedded single case study from an emic perspective, including qualitative observation and semi-structured expert interviews, and provided detailed insights into the company's multicultural work environment.

Findings – The results reveal that applying a qualitative design allowed the needed exploration and show that multicultural, geographically dispersed teams are positively experienced and considered necessary in today's globalised world. They are likely to increase in the future. Moreover, dynamic capabilities (multicultural competencies) are indispensable for multicultural teamwork. Regarding learning opportunities, different viewpoints for discussion and the ability to reflect on these offer valuable insights. In line with theory, multiculturalism is considered a “two-edged sword”, providing simultaneous benefits and challenges. Contrary to the theory, even highly important information transfers can occur virtually, although occasional physical contact is essential for trust building.

Originality/value – The multinational family business offers a unique example of a positive relationship between multiculturalism and organisational excellence and demonstrates how the application of a qualitative methodology can support theory building by delivering a revised model of dynamic capabilities in multicultural environments with geographical dispersion.

Keywords Cross-cultural management, International business, Multiculturalism,

Geographically dispersed teams, Family business, Dynamic capabilities, Positive organisational scholarship, Embedded single case study, Qualitative methodology, Emic approach, Exploration, Ethnographic research

Paper type Conceptual paper



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Introduction

There is a pervasive negative bias concerning culture in the international business (IB) literature—“cultural distance” (Tung and Verbeke, 2010) and “liability of foreignness” (Brannen, 2004)—while ignoring the positive effects. As this negative representation of multiculturalism may inaccurately reflect the entrepreneurial reality and influence company structures, Stahl and Tung (2015) recommend research on the positive effects of multiculturalism. Similarly, authors of positive organisational scholarship (POS) indicate the importance of investigating the positive effects of cultural issues (Cameron, 2017). Moreover, methodologically, there seems to be a predominance of quantitative methods, influencing perspectives and potential findings. Only two of the investigated papers published in the Journal of International Business Studies and three published in the Cross-Cultural Management (CCM) Journal were qualitative in nature, based on a literature review of 1141 IB and CCM papers published between 1989 and 2012 (Stahl and Tung, 2015). Thus, extensive qualitative research, particularly from an emic perspective in the field of multiculturalism, is required (Stahl and Tung, 2015).

Whether the effects of multicultural group constellations are beneficial or burdensome depends on the operating context and the team’s ability to manage processes effectively (Stahl *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, Stahl *et al.* (2010) reveal that this problem-focused view of multiculturalism concerns theoretical perspectives on cultural diversity in teams. However, multiculturalism may positively influence a group’s learning and innovation (Gibson *et al.*, 2007).

Learning types in companies were proposed by March (1991, p. 71) as exploitation “efficiency, implementation” and exploration “search, experimentation”. Exploitative strategies utilise of existing knowledge and skills and can be described as “reproduction and reconfiguration of existing competencies” (Zollo and Winter, 2002, p. 5). According to Gavetti and Levinthal (2000), exploration encompasses experimentation, possibly leading to revolutionary innovations. Overall, exploitation and exploration require divergent approaches in companies (Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008) and trade-offs regarding employee skills (Levinthal and March, 1993). However, researchers suggest that firms use both learning processes (Cao *et al.*, 2009).

To integrate learning mechanisms and multiculturalism, we consider ambiguity or a “two-edged sword” phenomenon in multicultural teams (Stahl and Tung, 2015, p. 404), because greater diversity may lead to broader perspectives (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2003) and to “more conflict, communications breakdowns, and inefficiencies” (Stahl and Tung, 2015, p. 404). Multicultural work groups excel at being inventive, although they could hinder repetitive assignments (Cantwell and Mudambi, 2005). Moreover, Zollo and Winter (2002) describe two types of learning mechanisms, which are rather replicative, compared to intuitive. Accordingly, this study proposes organisational activities that can be classified in operational firm functions and their constant improvement, referred to as “dynamic capability” (DC) (Zollo and Winter, 2002, p. 5).

Examining multiculturalism further highlights the significance of cross-cultural communication in virtual teams. Cagiltay *et al.* (2015) state that information and communication tools are useful when working across different countries virtually. However, because of research gaps, not all aspects related to multiculturalism and virtual communication have been revealed (Cagiltay *et al.*, 2015). According to Sheridan (2012), efficient multicultural, geographically dispersed teams require relationships based on trust, highly skilled team members and open-minded optimistic interaction.

Emphasis on positive phenomena is also a core message for POS that generally aims to view existing organisational concepts from new perspectives. Especially in the CCM literature, POS has attracted attention as previous research is predominantly negatively biased (Cameron, 2017). Cameron (2008) reviewed roughly 500 articles from 1990 to 2007 on company transformations, whereby almost half focused on negative change and just 4% on positive. Thus, negative factors capture more attention and have stronger effects than positive factors (Czapinski, 1985).

Research questions and key informants

This embedded single case study aims to provide a unique example of a multinational family-owned company to reveal a positive relationship between multicultural teams, learning and knowledge transfer. Using a qualitative methodology (ethnographic design) for deeper exploration provides detailed insights into the company's multicultural work environment and enables a closer look at this phenomenon. Accordingly, the research is conducted from an emic perspective: field research within the social group, and qualitative observations in the company. The combination of participative and nonstructured criteria is significant for qualitative observation, a common data collection technique with explorative research questions used by anthropologists and ethnographers (Lamnek, 1993). Moreover, the researcher's observation protocols and company internal data were complemented by secondary sources (previous case studies of the company, archival data, the company's homepage, company reports and yearbooks). Finally, for qualitative research—more precisely, IB case studies—the most common and valuable source of empirical material is semi-structured expert interviews (Yin, 2014). Thus, interviews were conducted with employees who had expert knowledge on multicultural teams, international work experience of at least 10 years in key positions, and worked in different company divisions for more comparability. The key informants were:

- (1) Regional Finance Director CER, Global Services. An Austrian native with 25 years of experience with multicultural, geographically dispersed teams (up to 20 persons with mixed countries of origin).
- (2) Director of Logistics Operations and Sales Region Support, Global Services. A Hungarian native with 26 years of experience with teams up to 40 persons from different countries of origin.
- (3) Senior Director, Global Services. A Danish native with 15 years of experience with culturally diverse teams.
- (4) Head of Global Travel, Fleet, Telephony Management, Global Services. An Albanian native with 17 years of experience in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams.
- (5) Senior Director in Substation Support, District Energy HDS from Slovenia, with 25 years of international experience.
- (6) Regional HR Manager Austria and Switzerland. Austrian native with over 12 years experience with multicultural, geographically-dispersed teams in human resources.

The following research questions were:

- (1) How does a company's multicultural work environment affect geographically dispersed multicultural teams?
- (2) How and which DCs of multicultural teams benefit a multinational family business (FB)?
- (3) Is an applied qualitative design sufficient to enable the exploration of the research process and support further research for theory testing, building and formation?

Overall, this study aims to illustrate whether multiculturalism can be an enriching part of the global workforce and highlight its positive effects on DCs, learning and knowledge transfer via a qualitative methodology as a best purpose suiting design.

Theoretical convergence

Several authors have attempted to define *culture* (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952), mostly connecting it to collectively shared values that manifest in the group's beliefs, assumptions,

morals and traditions (Hofstede, 1991; Jandt, 1995). These intangible and tangible aspects of culture influence how people view similar situations and are passed on to future generations (Earley and Gibson, 2002). Furthermore, different terms connected to culture can be differentiated: *multicultural* involves several cultural backgrounds and nationalities (Cox et al., 1991), *cross-cultural* compares several cultures (Johnson et al., 2006) and *transcultural* aims to reveal common elements of various cultures (Cuccioletta, 2001). The term “multicultural” is the most appropriate for this study.

Multicultural teams provide collective output to companies and stakeholders (Stahl et al., 2010). *Multicultural, geographically dispersed teams* are physically located in different cities, countries or time zones, and therefore rely on electronic communication and information systems (Huang et al., 2010). Accordingly, *multicultural competencies* are required, defined as the capabilities and skills necessary to interact with individuals from different cultures. These include individual characteristics (e.g. patience, positivity, openness and empathy; Stahl et al., 2013) and multicultural skills (e.g. defining cultural values, communicating across cultures, handling cultural misunderstandings, developing trust-based relationships and recognising opportunities; Nardon et al., 2013).

Multicultural organisations can gain competitive advantages through the benefits of a diverse workforce, such as a wide range of perspectives, capabilities, knowledge and experiences with foreign countries (Varner and Beamer, 2011). Moreover, multicultural, geographically dispersed team constellations provide new opportunities for collaboration (Thach and Murphy, 1994), learning and knowledge transfer (Webb and Palincsar, 1996). However, multicultural teams must overcome cultural challenges, such as communication problems or the misalignment of values for higher accomplishments (Stahl et al., 2010).

Besides cultural issues, FB and DC are the other theoretical underpinnings of this research. However, there are several definitions of these terms (Chua et al., 1999; Littunen and Hyrsky, 2000, p. 41; Teece, 2014; Teece et al., 1997). Herein, one of the oldest definitions of FBs is considered:

A company is considered a family business when it has been closely identified with at least two generations of a family and when this link has had a mutual influence on company policy and on the interests and objectives of the family (Donneley, 1964, p. 94).

Moreover, familiarity in organisations provides unique combinations of resources, capabilities and values (Schlippe and Frank, 2013), defined as DCs.

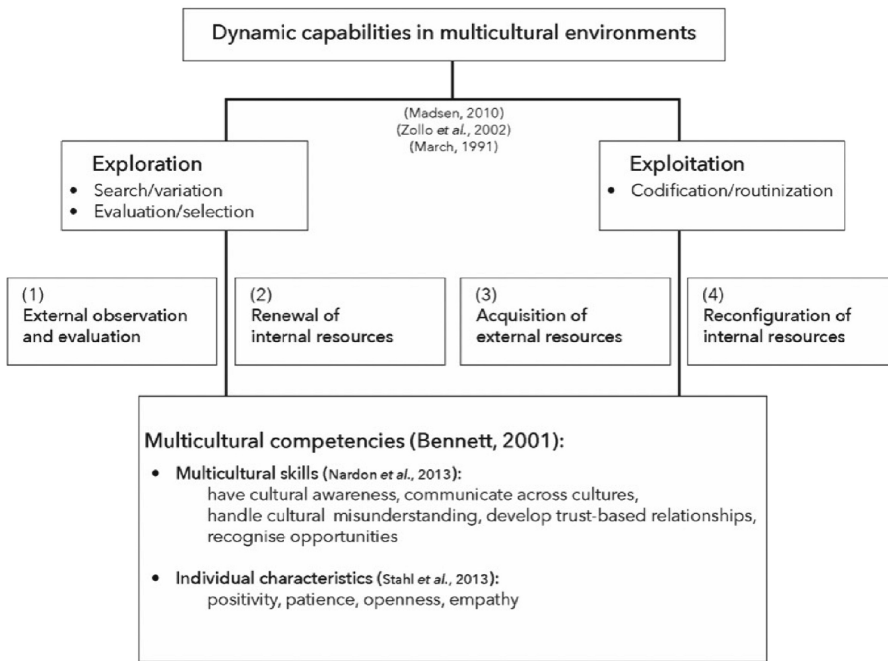
... the firm’s ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environment (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516).

In other words, DCs aim to generate innovation, adapt basic competencies and replicate existing business models in new markets (Zollo and Winter, 2002). Building DCs is a long-term learning process (Filippini et al., 2012), wherein organisational schemes must be built to improve a company’s development in changing environments. These processes can be either embedded as routines in organisational behaviour or developed through explorative or exploitative actions within organisations (Güttel and Konlechner, 2009).

Such valuable resource combinations can generate competitive advantages for the FB (Schlippe and Frank, 2013), which is why researchers have stated the importance of linking both research fields, especially in fast-changing environments (Chirico and Nordqvist, 2010).

When applying the exploration–exploitation learning framework to knowledge transfer within multicultural, geographically dispersed teams, explicit (shared easily, written; exploitation) and tacit (embedded in individuals’ experiences; exploration) knowledge can be differentiated (Javidan et al., 2005). The second key factor for successful team performance is the sharing of deep-level tacit knowledge, preferably face-to-face (Maznevski and Chui, 2013).

To conclude the theoretical convergence, Figure 1 illustrates a constructed model of DCs in multicultural environments. Fundamental to the development of DCs are multicultural competencies, which encompass individual characteristics such as patience, positivity, openness and empathy (Stahl *et al.*, 2013) and the multicultural skills to spot cultural beliefs and values, shape norms in multicultural groups, communicate across cultures, handle cultural misunderstandings and difficulties, develop trust-based relationships and recognise opportunities (Nardon *et al.*, 2013). Building on multicultural competencies, explorative and exploitative learning opportunities for multicultural team members can arise (March, 1991), considering the underlying learning mechanisms of search/variation, evaluation/selection and codification/routinisation and with determinants of internal/external types (Madsen, 2010; Zollo and Winter, 2002). Consequently, DCs in multicultural environments may represent the interrelation between multicultural competencies and exploration/exploitation learning (Madsen, 2010).



□ Based on the theoretical research model

Source(s): Adapted by Zipper-Weber and Mandik (2023) from Nardon *et al.* (2013), Bennet (2001), Stahl *et al.* (2013), March (1991), Madsen (2010), Zollo and Winter (2002)

Figure 1.
Model of dynamic
capabilities in
multicultural
environments

Empirical aspect

Qualitative research design

Emic perspective. From a multiculturalism perspective, two well-established research approaches have evolved: the etic approach—a comparative, external viewpoint—and the

emic approach—an internal angle (Morris *et al.*, 1999). Etic studies in CCM fields can be associated with different cultural dimensions and frameworks (Hall and Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012). Although they provide valuable information on cultural understanding (Jackson and Niblo, 2003), etic studies have been criticised for their generalising perspective (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the emic approach gains importance by highlighting the unique and complex aspects of culture (Maznevski and Chui, 2013).

Ethnography. Ethnography can be considered a suitable qualitative method to study complex, multicultural phenomena because of its emphasis on the emic perspective and interpretation (Fetterman, 2010). Particularly regarding culture, ethnography of communication seems most appropriate, as its goal is to analyse the communication and information transfers in multicultural team constellations (Barro *et al.*, 1998; Hymes, 1974).

Thus, ethnographic research methods will be applied based on an emic perspective while observing, interviewing and analysing diverse company data within several months in 2018–2019 to reveal how learning and information transfer in multinational, geographically dispersed teams contribute to building DCs in multinational FBs. Qualitative observation has been used in the early stage of empirical research by monitoring pre-selected interview categories, before conducting in-depth, expert interviews to justify the case study company selection. Moreover, those results from the qualitative observation reveal additional insider information on multicultural work environment and cross-cultural communication at Family Business, which supplements the interview results.

Single case study. A single case study appears to be the most realistic option when time and resources are considered in the framework of a research (Yin, 2014), because gathering a profound insider perspective requires intensive occupation. Moreover, the multicultural teams in FBs can be described as unique in the way they are managed, organised and function by consisting of experts, who specialise in virtual work across national borders owing to learning from long-term, multicultural team experiences from a very early stage. Finally, it entails a well-established multinational FB, a poorly researched field in the IB literature (Shams and Björnberg, 2006). Accordingly, familiarity can be viewed as a unique advantage in terms of a higher feeling of responsibility towards the family compared to stakeholders and the family's sincere interest in the well-being of the company and its employees.

Company description

The investigated company was founded in Denmark in 1933. Starting as a single-man project, the FB evolved into a successful, multinational company with net sales of €6,1bn in 2018. The global group operates as producers and suppliers of heating and cooling systems, solar and wind power and industrial and motion controls (Boyd *et al.*, 2010).

As of 2017, the company was still family owned and supervised by a family foundation. The company's corporate culture and structures resemble those of Denmark's national culture, characterized by flat hierarchies, low power distance, consensus-seeking behaviour and openness to debate. These characteristics can be supported by observation protocols (Company Yearbook, 2017; Family Business Observation Protocol 1, 2019). Furthermore, Danish enterprises' core values are trustworthiness, reliability, enthusiasm and sustainability (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Institute for Languages and Cultures, 2015).

Regarding internationalisation, after Second World War, the first exporting steps were made by forming business relationships with Northern European dealers. Its first subsidiary was built in Argentina in the 1950s. With the family generation change in 1996, a new family member with a global mindset was encouraged as the chief executive officer (CEO) for further international expansion with a market-to-market approach. Shortly afterwards, the first factory was built in China; further acquisitions were made in Europe, the USA and South

Africa, and more sales companies were established. Today, the FB accounts of 71 international factories are located in 20 countries (Boyd *et al.*, 2010).

Regarding multicultural aspects, the company employs almost 28,000 people from more than 100 nationalities. Moreover, the FB believes that multicultural teams foster innovation and better results. According to an internal survey conducted in 2018, multicultural, geographically dispersed team leaders communicate well with their team members. In addition, the company requires every manager to gain two years of experience abroad to develop multicultural competencies and skills. Thus, the investigated company places high emphasis on a multicultural and diverse workforce based on different cultural and national backgrounds, viewpoints, competencies, genders and ages (Boyd *et al.*, 2010; Fan, 2006) [1].

Findings from the interviews

Multicultural, geographically dispersed teams

Experiences and first impressions. The initial impressions of multicultural, geographically dispersed virtual teams were generally positive in terms of motivation, passion, dedication and enrichment [2]:

The work with multicultural teams is very enriching for me. In culturally homogenous teams, I would have feelings of limitations and restriction, similar to being stuck in a box without escape [3].

Another interviewee repeatedly mentioned the high motivation, passion and dedication linked to working in multicultural teams:

The motivation was extremely high to work in multicultural teams in an Asian fast-changing environment. [4]

Such experiences contradict the pervasive negative bias in CCM and IB literature (Stahl and Tung, 2015), and can rather be linked to POS, where individuals experience more motivation, energy, work–life balance and job satisfaction in positive work environments (Luthans and Youssef, 2007).

Multicultural work environment: differences and considerable aspects. When comparing the differences in working in homogenous versus multicultural teams, the latter requires higher cultural awareness and sensitivity, reflection, interpersonal communication skills and acceptance of certain restrictions [5]. Moreover, time management is extremely important in multicultural teams, especially with higher geographical dispersion and the virtual work style:

The more virtual, the more structure is needed and the more formalisation [6].

Furthermore:

Especially in virtual meetings with different time zones, it would be disrespectful not to have a firm agenda, in terms of discussion topics and preparation [7].

There is a short relationship-building period at the beginning of meetings about recent business travel or personal issues, and then the meeting agenda and structure are presented and discussed in a stepwise manner [8]. Another interviewee mentioned that, as a rule of thumb, managers and employees must invest twice as much time in virtual work environments as in collocated teams [9].

Trust is also a key driver of successful multicultural teams, which is why interviewees were asked about their perceptions of trust in multicultural constellations. The results reveal that relationships based on trust are fundamental for efficient collaboration in this type of team [10]. The most important aspects of trust mentioned were openness, honesty, cultural understanding, sensitivity and knowledge of people [11].

Working virtually even empowers people more, because employees complete the task without frequent contact and with more independence [12].

Another key informant stated that trust could be expressed through actions and previous joint experiences with colleagues:

Trust is built by reliability and generalising past experiences (together) [13].

Knowledge of people is essential for building trust; this is what good leaders are known for. However, successful virtual leadership in multicultural environments must be differentiated from leadership in culturally homogeneous collocated teams.

Virtual, global leadership requires higher effort to be successful. (...) It is not a job for lazy people [14].

Furthermore:

Although the leadership style is the same, working in a multicultural environment requires more listening, reflecting, and communicating across different cultures, in different languages [15].

Advantages and disadvantages: “two-edged sword”. The challenges included higher complexity, discipline, investment of time and effort, little face-to-face interaction and occasional Internet connection problems [16]. These issues can often be frustrating, especially with senior management and direct supervisors in headquarters who do not view frequent contact as essential. Innovatively, one multicultural team leader introduced “virtual coffee” with her boss in Denmark during lunchbreaks, while driving or whenever the senior manager could spare some time to maintain the relationship [17]. Time zones, language fluency and different cultures were also mentioned as a “two-edged sword” (Stahl and Tung, 2015, p. 404) or regarding ambidexterity (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2003) [18]:

As much about these advantages (different time zones, languages, cultures), the same aspects are actually a disadvantage [19].

Conversely, the advantages of multicultural teamwork include cultural diversity, more perspectives and opinions and a higher level of flexibility [20].

What is special in these multicultural teams is that you can really think out of the box [21].

From a company’s perspective, worldwide success requires excellent internal infrastructure and highly skilled human resource (HR) capital. Overall, most interviewees viewed multicultural, geographically dispersed teams and the development of multicultural competencies for employees as fundamental to the globalised, fast-changing work environment of the future.

Recruiting outside of Europe is very interesting, different, and really challenging, (...) but will be increasingly necessary in the nearest future [22].

DCs

Multicultural competencies. The interview findings outline the importance of employees with DCs and more precisely with multicultural competencies, including awareness of cultural beliefs and values, shaping norms in multicultural teams, communication across cultures, handling of cultural misunderstandings, development of trust-based relationships and recognition of opportunities in a multicultural, virtual work environment [23]. However, the interviewees also emphasised the relevance of individual characteristics in multicultural

team work, such as personality, openness and people-minded focus, empathy and respect, patience, sensitivity and the will to learn [24].

Employees with multicultural competencies can benefit the company with their diverse background, different views on topics, alternative way of working together, and more open-minded approach [25].

From the global HR perspective:

Diverse teams as a guiding principle are one of the elements that we believe is fundamental for the company to outperform on the market. (. . .) We also have a plan going forward on how to strengthen diverse hiring in the future [26].

According to the local HR department in Austria, it is difficult to find the right people locally, which is why open, flexible and global recruiting is required:

It is getting harder to find people, especially technicians; HR has to be more open-minded and look in other countries [27].

Overall, the results reveal that the DC renewal of internal resources is ensured by searching for the right employees and supporting multicultural team constellations to enhance creativity, innovative thinking and flexibility, as well as the reconfiguration of internal processes in HR, which has changed to be more open, flexible and global.

To conclude:

Multicultural teams require working at a distance but staying close enough to work together [28].

Exploitation versus exploration

All multicultural, geographically dispersed teams use both explorative and exploitative techniques, depending on the project timeline, meaning that their purpose is to search for innovations, reform processes and evaluate options, as well as to routinise and standardise processes [29]. This implies that having people with both innovative and efficient, operational mindsets is essential for successful multicultural team constellations, which may sometimes be challenging.

That in itself can be a source of conflict in the team, as people think, feel, and are motivated differently; however, it is needed [30].

The interview results highlight the “two-edged sword” (Stahl and Tung, 2015, p. 404) relationship of exploration and exploitation (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2003). For example, one interviewee is involved in the routinisation of a new system where constant quality controls search for further innovations.

Currently my multicultural team is more exploiting by implementing a new system, with constant explorative quality controls for process improvement [31].

Finally, an interesting finding was revealed by an interview partner who was virtually involved in a highly innovative project [32]. The last face-to-face meeting was held one year ago [33]. He stated:

Now we are rolling out an extremely innovative, large logistics project to set up a new structure across all four segments of FB and across the four regions in Europe. (. . .) We are working virtually [34].

This result contradicts the pervasive stream in theoretical research, that innovation can be fostered most efficiently through face-to-face meetings (Maznevski and Chui, 2013).

Cross-cultural communication

Multicultural, geographically dispersed teams require different communication styles, tools [35] and stronger interpersonal communication skills:

The way of working is completely different . . . It requires adaptation time, as well as acceptance and awareness of using other cross-cultural communication tools efficiently [36].

Moreover, with digitalisation and globalisation, the communication style has changed; while several years ago, it was indispensable to be physically present in meetings, today, virtual communication tools enable more effective multicultural teamwork in a fast-changing environment [37].

Back then cross-cultural communication posed difficulties, while now it is easier [38].

Therefore, nowadays, to be a successful multicultural team leader, the most important aspects involve being communicative, passionate about people, and interested in the job.

Do not work in virtual multicultural leadership if you are not passionate about leading diverse people and can't handle challenging communication [39].

Furthermore:

It is a different way of working, that you either like or don't [40].

Working across cultures with virtual communication tools also requires clear and careful communication, as well as differentiation regarding hierarchy structures.

Multicultural teams have to be very clear and careful in their verbal or written communication and respect cultural differences [41].

Knowledge transfer

Company structures and processes. Multicultural teams are becoming indispensable for multinational companies. Similarly, establishing effective structures and processes that facilitate knowledge transfer in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams seems necessary in today's digitalised and globalised world [42].

Such an infrastructure is almost a must nowadays, especially when working across time zones [43].

It is part of today's time to have more flexible structures, because of the high multicultural context [44].

According to all key informants, FBs offer such excellent structures and processes regarding cross-cultural communication tools, flexibility and home office arrangements, thus, providing the best possible multicultural, virtual work environment [45].

Technology has definitely changed a lot (. . .) to facilitate faster communication with team members, bosses, and stakeholders [46].

Overall, the DC reconfiguration of internal processes indicates flexible, open-minded structures and processes with constant improvements in the communication infrastructure.

Virtual versus physical knowledge transfer

The degree and frequency of information and knowledge transfer via virtual communication tools depend on the task's importance and complexity, as well as employee preferences [47]. Almost every piece of information can be shared virtually [48]. For example:

The information that we are sharing virtually in the logistics team is, for example, operational KPIs, current situation in the warehouse and management, high focus on safety issues, new projects for more efficiency in the operations, and also discussing and optimising the project [49].

Furthermore:

Highly important information can also be shared virtually [50].

These interview results contradict the underlying theory mentioned in the theoretical section, where the key factor for team performance is sharing deep-level tacit knowledge (Maznevski and Chui, 2013), which is embedded in individuals' experiences and reflections and cannot be expressed explicitly; thus, face-to-face interactions and discussions are most suitable for sharing this type of knowledge in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams (Javidan *et al.*, 2005). According to the interviewees, the most useful tool for sharing explicit information is email, consistent with the literature (Javidan *et al.*, 2005). However, email should not be used as the sole source:

There is an overflow of e-mails with potential of misunderstanding. To break the discussion, having a short call can be a good alternative [51].

Moreover, the frequency of one-to-one virtual meetings can be summed up as weekly or biweekly, on average.

However, the best way to develop trust in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams is via both physical and virtual interactions because, solely on a virtual basis, it is more difficult [52]. This signals the relevance of physical team meetings in geographically dispersed teams with quotes such as:

It is important to combine collocation with non-collocation, because physical meetings are necessary for mutual adjustment [53].

Discussion

This study illustrates multicultural, geographically dispersed teams as an essential and growing part of a global workforce for multinational FBs, and highlights the predominance of the positive effects with regard to DCs, learning and knowledge transfer. Multicultural competencies are required, and multinational organisations benefit from a diverse workforce. Unique and valuable combinations of resources, capabilities and values generate competitive advantages for the investigated FB, tested in fast-changing environments over decades. Although differences exist compared to homogenous teams, including distance, time zones, languages, mentioned as a "two-edged sword" (Stahl and Tung, 2015, p. 404) or ambidexterity (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2003) in underlying theory, those aspects provide simultaneous benefits and challenges in multicultural teams.

Virtual communication tools significantly facilitate cross-cultural communication between geographically dispersed, multicultural teams and ideally link face-to-face interaction with electronic communication technology by sharing tacit knowledge in virtual meetings and via e-mail for explicit information. Concerning exploration and exploitation, this study reveals that multicultural teams in a company exploit existing resources and routines for efficiency purposes with a simultaneous combination of exploration of new ways for incremental innovations, fundamental for DCs. Furthermore, two types of DCs can be viewed as most relevant for this paper: first, renewal of internal resources by a specific search for the right employees with DCs and supporting multicultural team constellations to enhance creativity, innovative thinking and flexibility, as well as reconfiguring internal processes in HR, which have become more open, flexible and global. Finally, multicultural, geographically dispersed team constellations that work virtually have dramatically increased with globalisation and the use of new media forms and will play necessary roles in the future.

Contrary to the underlying theoretical research, even highly important information transfers can occur successfully on a virtual basis, although occasional physical contact is

essential for building trust in multicultural teams. In this context, a multinational FB offers an example of the positive relationship between multiculturalism and organisational excellence.

Limitations and implications for further research

Overall, careful consideration was given to the qualitative criteria of objectivity, validity and reliability in the study (Johnson, 1997; Yin, 2014). Nonetheless, it is important to address several limitations. Herein, an applied qualitative methodology with underlying ethnographic research design for this unique embedded single case study from an emic perspective enabled the exploration of the research process by providing detailed insights into the company's multicultural work environment and consequently supported hypotheses formulation for further theory testing. Therefore, it did not aim, and thus could not provide, comparability to other multinational companies and representation for scientific generalisation, or complete objectivity (emic perspective), because it showed only a small, simplified picture of real life, complex situations, processes and relationships based on human experiences. Moreover, family-owned and multinational company aspects represent uniqueness in the CCM literature, as this field has been little researched so far. However, several companies of different sizes and types exist in IB. Another limitation is the location, as Austria is comparably small, and larger multinational companies represent a rather exceptional business form, which complicates access to potential research companies. Furthermore, the business segment of the case study can be viewed as a limitation because there may be various perceptions of multicultural, geographically dispersed teams across industries.

Accordingly, implications for further research include: (1) more qualitative research and multiple case studies on the positive effects of multicultural, geographically dispersed teams in FBs; (2) quantitative research based on the hypotheses proposed below and (3) theory testing of the revised model of DCs in multicultural environments with geographical dispersion.

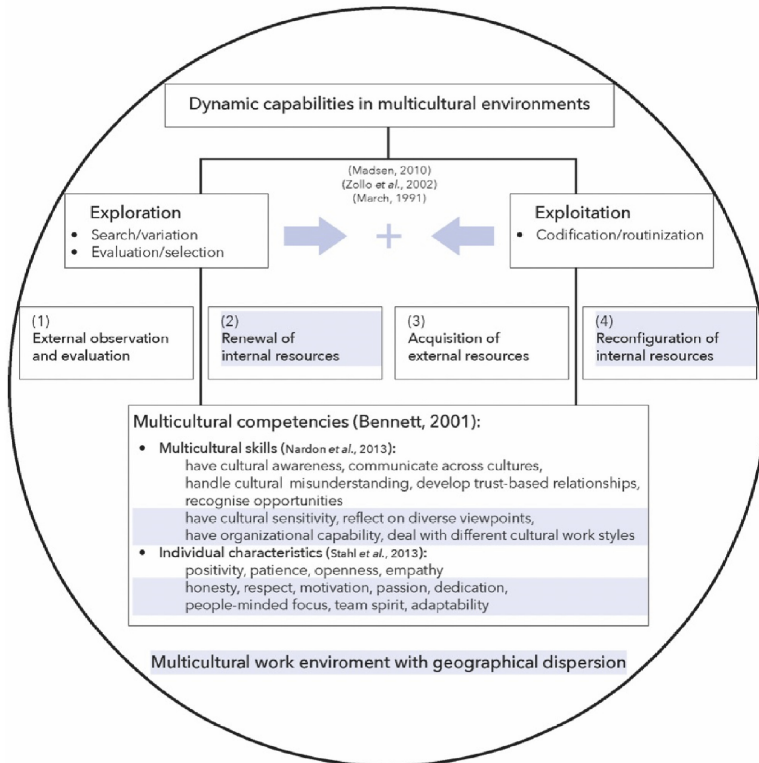
Based on the findings of this qualitative study, the following hypotheses can be used for further testing via a quantitative methodology.

- H1.* (positive effect of multiculturality): Successful multicultural, geographically dispersed teams lead to higher motivation and job satisfaction as part of organisational excellence.
- H2.* (DCs): Enhancing creativity, innovative thinking and flexibility in multicultural teams boosts the renewal of internal resources and thus positively affects the performance of multicultural geographically dispersed teams.
- H3.* (DCs): The open-minded, flexible and global structures and processes of multinational FBs support the reconfiguration of internal processes, which positively affects multicultural, geographically dispersed teams.
- H4.* (Learning opportunities): The more multicultural the work environment, the greater the learning opportunities for employees.
- H5.* (Knowledge transfer): The use of virtual communication tools enables the reliable transfer of important knowledge in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams.

A notable limitation is that the literature and research data are collected and analysed before the COVID-19 pandemic, thus requiring further research to carefully reconsider most insights, particularly those related to virtual communication.

The extent where a CEO's family membership in line with his global mindset can influence organisational culture and multiculturalism in the context of FBs and DCs is worth investigating too.

The last implication involves testing the revised model of DCs in multicultural environments with geographical dispersion, where the practical implications are highlighted for easier visualisation. As a result, the multicultural work environment expands through geographical dispersion, as the interviewed team members work together with physical distance, and can therefore offer expert insights into multicultural, geographically dispersed work environments worldwide. Based on exploration and exploitation learning, multicultural teams in FBs use both explorative and exploitative techniques depending on the project, implying that having people with innovative and efficient operational mindsets is essential for successful multicultural team constellations. The results also reveal that the renewal of internal resources is ensured by a specific search for the right employees with DCs and supporting multicultural team constellations to enhance creativity, innovative thinking and flexibility, as well as reconfiguring internal processes in HR, which have changed to be more open, flexible and global (see Figure 2).



- Based on the theoretical research model
- Practical implications from research findings

Source(s): Adapted by Zipper-Weber and Mandik (2023) from research findings (2019), based on Nardon *et al.* (2013), Bennet (2001), Stahl *et al.* (2013), March (1991), Madsen (2010), Zollo and Winter (2002)

Figure 2.
Revised model of
dynamic capabilities in
multicultural
environments with
geographical
dispersion

Finally, certain additional multicultural competencies can be viewed as fundamental to the development of DCs in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams. Concerning multicultural skills, the findings include cultural sensitivity, organisational capability, ability to reflect on diverse viewpoints and dealing with different cultural work styles. However, personality aspects, such as honesty, respect, motivation, passion, dedication, people-minded focus, team spirit and adaptability, complement the revised research model. The interrelation of DCs, exploration and exploitation and multicultural competencies remains the same, as mentioned in the theoretical research model presented earlier (Figure 1).

Conclusion

Investigating multinational FBs offers a unique example of a positive relationship between multiculturalism and organisational excellence and contributes to further research by demonstrating how the application of a qualitative methodology can support theory building by delivering a revised model of DCs in multicultural environments with geographical dispersion. Additional research on the positive effects of multiculturalism is essential.

Notes

1. Company Homepage, 2019; Company Sustainability Report, 2018, p. 4, 15, 18; Company Yearbook, 2017;
2. Int 5, 129–131; 136–137; 186; Int 1, 10–11; Int 2, 84–88; Int 6, 48
3. Int 2, 84–88
4. Int 5, 129–131; 136–137; 186
5. Int 1, 39–46; Int 2, 10; Int 5, 81–86
6. (Int 4, 157–158).
7. Int 2, 165–168
8. Family Business observation protocol 1, 2019, meeting
9. Int 3, 124–127
10. Int 1, 81; Int 2, 184 and 206–207; Int 4, 120
11. Int 2, 184–207, Int 5, 222–223, Int 4, 120–122 and 131, Int 3, 168–169
12. Int 3, 149–155
13. Int 4, 135–136
14. Int 4, 570–574
15. Int 5, 81–86
16. Int 5, 139–141; Int 2, 98–100, Int 1, 119–120; Int 2, 91–94, Int 1, 117–118; Family Business observation protocol 2, 2019, challenges.
17. Family Business observation protocol 1, 2019, difficulties
18. Int 2, 222–223 and 115–118 and 89–91 and 98–100; Int 4, 249–250 and 238 and 247–249
19. Int 4, 266–292
20. Int 2, 78–79; Int 3, 318–325; Int 2, 80–83
21. Int 2, 87–88
22. Int 6, 300–303
23. Int 1, 133–136; Int 2, 237–239; Int 5, 294

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24. Int 4, 328 and 352; Int 6, 130–132; Int 1, 138–140; Int 4, 339; Int 6, 130–132; Int 5, 244 and 262; Int 4, 326 and 339; Int 5, 251; Int 1, 140–141; Int 4, 327; Int 2, 226–268 and 219–225; Int 3, 220–221
 25. Int 6, 206–217
 26. Global HR, 2019
 27. Int 6, 105–108
 28. Int 6, 152–153
 29. Int 1, 205–206; Int 2, 349; Int 3, 259; Int 5, 332; Int 6, 259
 30. Int 4, 229–231
 31. Int 1, 210– 212 and 216–218 and 223
 32. Int 3, 83–93 and 107
 33. Int 3, 95
 34. Int 3, 83–93, 107
 35. Int 1, 39–46; Int 5, 81–86
 36. Int 1, 39–46
 37. Int 5, 117–121 and 175; Int 5, 338–346, Int 6, 146
 38. Int 5, 117–121 and 175
 39. Int 2, 558– 559
 40. Int 6, 146–147
 41. Int 2, 122–124 and 209–211
 42. Int 5, 435–437; Int 5, 441–442; Int 6, 272–273
 43. Int 5, 435– 437
 44. Int 6, 272–273
 45. Int 1, 264; Int 1, 291–293; Int 2, 369–370; Int 3, 63–64; Int 4, 108–111
 46. Int 4, 101–104 and 88–90
 47. Observation protocol 1, 2019, learning
 48. Int 1, 372–374; Int 3, 184
 49. Int 2, 213–323
 50. Int 1, 372–374; Int 3, 184
 51. Int 5, 395–397
 52. Int 1, 81–82; Int 2, 187–188, Int 4, 138, Family Business observation protocol 1, 2019, difficulties
 53. Int 4, 139– 141

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