

## **Motivation and mobility in remote teams: case of a company operating in the telecom sector**

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**Article Type:** Management science, Business organization, Entrepreneurship.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a context of virtuality, it would suffice for remote management to have employees who are motivated, autonomous, have little need for contact with their hierarchy, and who need a minimum of recognition and advice from the hierarchy.

In general, local motivational factors such as recognition, commitment, autonomy, leadership seem to positively affect the satisfaction and performance of virtual team members .

In this research work, we will address the various actions that will allow the manager of a virtual team to achieve the motivation and mobilization of his collaborators.

**Keywords:** mobility, motivation, performance, management

## **1 Introduction**

Motivation in a team is defined according to Muller et al. (2009) as the process or component that regulates its commitment to a specific activity. It determines the triggering in a certain direction with the desired intensity and ensures its continuation until completion or interruption.

Motivation is at the forefront of today's organizations. It determines the level of employee productivity. Motivation is trivially assimilated to a "reserve of energy", since it usually manifests itself through the deployment of energy (in various forms such as assiduity, perseverance, discipline, enthusiasm...). But more than a form of "potential energy", motivation is an instance of integration and regulation of a multitude of parameters relating to the opportunities of an environment and the demands of a situation (Cuendet et al., 1986).

According to Barni (2003), in a virtual context, it would suffice for remote management to have employees who are motivated, autonomous, have little contact with their hierarchy, and need a minimum of recognition and advice from the hierarchy.

In general, local motivational factors such as recognition, commitment, autonomy, leadership seem to positively affect the satisfaction and performance of virtual team members (Pink, 2011; Ingason et al., 2010).

In this research work, we will address the various actions that will allow the manager of a virtual team to achieve the motivation and mobilization of his collaborators.

## **2 Research Methodology**

In order to provide an initial answer to the research question, an exploratory empirical study was carried out with a multinational company (referred to as MT in the rest of this article). This company occupies the position of leader in the telecommunications sector in Morocco and identified as having set up virtual teams.

There are several reasons for adopting this form of team - virtual teams - including the strong culture of 'networked' and 'digitized' communication within MT and also its ability to manage the activity of remote employees through ICT while respecting regulations.

Employees belonging to these teams are now judged on results and not on means, and the company has changed its approach to team management by promoting management by objectives. Generally speaking, the mobilization of this new form of work has required the MT company to make numerous adaptations, both on a technological and organizational level, in order to be able to fully benefit from the advantages it can provide.

Ultimately, the functions of mobile environments have evolved, and have had a direct impact on the way work is organized, and in particular on team motivation, regardless of the degree of mobility of subordinates. As a result, the function of motivation in these virtual teams was not without managerial, regulatory and organizational adjustments.

The interviews were conducted over a period of 19 months: between January 2018 and July 2019. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted; the average duration of each interview was approximately 35 minutes, which corresponds to a total duration of 7 hours (approximately).

We made sure to gather the vision of the management and the vision of the individuals dispersed in different sites.

The conduct of the interviews followed a certain protocol. In most cases, interviews were conducted in the respondents' physical work space (office, break room, meeting room), but there were some interviews that were conducted with MSN, or skype, and even by telephone. The latter were mostly conducted with people who had not been on Tunisian territory at the time of our investigation.

The following table presents the composition of the sample drawn between 2017 and 2019 maintaining continuity of the texts.

**Table 1: sample components**

Company	Type of actors	Staff	Nationality
MT	Senior executives	3	1 French 2 Moroccans
	Managers	3	Moroccans
	Engineers	10	2 Moroccans, 2 French,
	Directors	2	Moroccans
	Operational	2	Moroccans
Total		20	

Finally, we conducted a content analysis of these interviews to obtain research results. This research being exploratory, the interviews covered many areas such as the functioning of virtual teams, the processes of animation, coordination and communication.

In this paper, we will only retain the part of the interview dealing with the motivation in these virtual teams and its repercussion on the collective performance of the group.

### 3 Theory and Calculation

#### 1- Building Commitment

The first action facilitating a mobilizing synergy within the group will be to obtain from the constitution of the team a strong commitment of the members in the tasks to be accomplished as well as in the group itself. In such contexts, personal commitment is the critical factor for a favorable configuration. The group's activity and performance depend on this initial commitment and its maintenance until the end of the mission (Renneker, 2004). The manager is the first to be involved in this commitment; he will have to make an effort to obtain this commitment and also to maintain it until the end of the work to be carried out. Even more so than in a classic situation of proximity management, obtaining the commitment of members,

when you are at a distance, means clearly defining the rules of the game and the operating mode in the relationship between the manager and his collaborators.

But how do you set the rules of the game? It is simply a matter of moving from the rule of the "self" to the rule of the collective game, given that performance is the result of a shared representation (Déroulède, 2009).

The rules of the game, when they are predefined in advance and emanate from a common agreement, consolidate trust within a virtual team and effectively guide collective and individual action. They provide a common frame of reference in terms of shared values and behaviors, which are used for the daily management of a dispersed or even fragmented team. They also help prevent the risks inherent to distance: for example, forgetting instructions, distorted messages, etc.

The rules also ensure the psychological integrity and safety of team members. In addition, the rules of the game, when respected within the team, ensure the team's durability, credibility and usefulness in the service of the company's overall performance. They codify everyone's rights and duties.

Nevertheless, too many, persecutory, formal, rigid rules are detrimental to collective performance. Indeed, often the rules of the game do not exist or are vague and generate drifts. It is therefore recommended that the manager builds effective rules of the game and reminds them in certain cases. This is why Déroulède (2009) suggests during the piloting of a virtual team to contractualize rules respecting certain criteria of effectiveness which are quoted in the following table.

**Table 2: Criteria for the effectiveness of the rules of play of a virtual team**

<b>Effectiveness criteria</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Precise and explained rules</b>	The rules must be clear, precise and communicated to all team members at a meeting.
<b>Rules relayed by local players</b>	The formulation of rules must be based on a consensus and an exchange of concessions and counterparts between the manager and the various parties.
<b>Applicable rules</b>	Failure to meet this criterion can have serious consequences. No rules are better than unenforceable rules.
<b>Useful rules</b>	The rule must be a help to work more efficiently, it must be a practical help to achieve the planned objectives. It is not contradictory to the work requirements but coherent and indispensable.
<b>Contractual rules</b>	They present a reciprocal commitment, on the one hand between the leader and the employees, and on the other hand between the employees themselves.
<b>Protective rules (psychological safety)</b>	Protective rules provide the necessary dose of safety for any human action and respond to the concerns of group members.
<b>Adaptable rules</b>	These rules must be flexible to allow for flexibility in the organization.

**Source: Taken from Déroulède, 2009: p. 74**

## **2. Recognition at work**

Workplace recognition is a judgment about the employee's contribution, both in terms of work regulations and personal investment and commitment. It also consists of evaluating the results of this work and

highlighting them. In general, it highlights the unique contribution of each employee, as well as valuing their professional experience and/or expertise (De Konink, 1999).

Recognition in the workplace can take various forms: the spoken word, the written word, the object as a symbol, demands for wages, status, but also a more general and diffuse demand that focuses on the person themselves, dignity and the “respect” that everyone believes they find in their work (Bourcier and Palobart 1997).

Elusive object because multidimensional, it is at the same time daily and ritualized, individual and collective, it concerns as much the individual as the travail; it can be financial or "symbolic". In light of this general definition from the literature on this theme, it is possible to identify four forms of recognition in the workplace.

**Table n °3: the different types of recognition**

<b>Recognize the person</b>	It is an existential and humanistic conception. It is interested in people as singular beings. In this approach, recognition is about the individual, not the worker.
<b>Recognize result</b>	It is a behavioral approach. It focuses on effective, measurable, observable and controllable work outcomes. Recognition at work, in this sense, is seen as a reward. Commission, profit-sharing and bonuses are direct applications of this instrumental recognition.
<b>Recognize the effort</b>	This is the subjective perspective. It is based on the fact that the results are not necessarily proportional to the efforts made. In a depressed market, for example, employees may put in more effort without the results following. The recognition, therefore, independent of the final results, is seen in particular in the symbolic register.
<b>Recognizing the competences</b>	This is the ethical perspective. It focuses primarily on the competencies of the individual and individual responsibilities. It also takes into account the moral principles and human values that guide an organization, whether it be justice, equity or social responsibility.

In virtual teams, several authors claim that recognition positively affects the motivation, satisfaction and performance of team members (Hertel et al., 2005 and Lee-Kelly, 2002).

The nature of a virtual team requires a shift from a collective reward to a much more individualized reward that allows each individual to find his or her place. Indeed, no two individuals want to be thanked in the same way. If one employee likes to be the center of attention, the other prefers to receive praise in a more intimate setting. To achieve meaningful individual recognition, managers must first establish each member's preferences:

- **In what role will the employee's skills and talents contribute most to the success of the team and the company?**
- **What kind of recognition does this employee appreciate?**
- **What type of personalized reward will best recognize the employee's contribution and role in the organization's success?**

In short, the personal recognition of remote collaborators focuses on the fact that virtual work forces the manager to become individualized, moving from group management to management of scattered



individuals. Each of these collaborators has his own personality, skills, strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, recognition awards must be personalized and meaningful.

### **3. Developing autonomy**

Chatzis et al. (1999) define autonomy as the capacity of a subject to determine "freely" the rules of action to which he submits, to set, within his space of action, the precise modalities of his activity, without the formal organization imposing its norms on him. Following the same line of thought, Everaere (1999) defines autonomy through the possibility for the employee to choose his or her work method, the sequences of his or her tasks, the pace of his or her work and his or her movements outside the workplace.

For his part, Zarifian (1999) insisted on the interrelation context to define autonomy as an ability to cooperate and self-organize within the same team.

While for Périlleux (2001) autonomy does not only have an individual or collective dimension, it is a necessary condition for the efficiency of firms under flexibility constraints.

In the literature on virtual teams, the theme of autonomy has been little studied (Kirkman et al., 2004). Nevertheless, Kirkman et al. (2004) demonstrated that the autonomy (empowerment) of virtual team members was positively related to the team's performance. More specifically, in terms of process improvement and customer satisfaction.

Several authors agree that one of the first prerequisites for granting autonomy in a virtual team is competence. Indeed, competence is a factor favourable to performance, which must be combined with the ability to cooperate with the other members of the team (Chatzis et al., 1999).

Boterf (1998) links the development of professional skills to the psycho-sociological processes of developing autonomy at work through the construction of self-esteem.

In addition to having a recognized competency, members of a virtual team must share the responsibility. To do so, they will have to work autonomously while being responsible for their decision and communicating on the information collected.

In addition to prior competence, some research (Cascio, 1999; Shin, 2004; Pink, 2011) shows that certain combinations of personal attributes (autonomy, flexibility, communication skills, etc.) make individuals who possess them more successful in virtual teams.

### **4. From leadership to e-leadership**

The constant parade of ICT development combined with the advent of virtual teams has led to the emergence of a new context of leadership which is e-leadership or virtual leadership. Nowadays, e-leadership is considered extremely crucial for the mobilization of energies and organizational performance. Indeed, it plays a key role in mobilizing virtual teams to achieve pre-established objectives.

Few definitions of e-leadership have been proposed to date. However, among the first research conducted on the subject, Avolio et al. (2000) present e-leadership as a social influence process mediated by information and communication technologies in order to produce a change in the attitudes, thoughts, emotions, behaviours and/or performance of individuals, groups and/or organizations.

The importance of the functions and roles of leadership has led researchers to focus most of their studies on the factors of its effectiveness and to study its effects on virtual team performance (Robert and You, 2013; Bergman et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Miriam and Martin, 2010; Jawadi, 2008; Lurey and Raisinghani, 2001).

Lurey and Raisinghani, (2001) emphasize the importance of e-leader roles in building positive team processes, developing relationships, creating reward systems, and selecting appropriate skills for the job. They also stress the importance of formalizing reports and work as well as regulating behaviors to ensure team performance.

Jawadi (2008) proposes a lot of actions that an e-leader has to undertake in order to carry out the function of motivation in a virtual team. The latter suggests that in addition to the aspects related to cohesion and technology, the e-leader should not be distracted from his or her main mission, which is the management of human resources and their mobilization for the achievement of objectives. Indeed, the motivation of team members becomes a problematic task in the virtual context because of the distance. It is ensured through the work, its nature, its quality and its level of adequacy with the set objectives.

However, in order to motivate team members, the e-leader must take into account the sense of isolation that can result from lack of face-to-face interaction and physical separation (Sarker & Sahay, 2004, cited in Jawadi, 2008). The e-leader should also encourage the sharing of social information that allows members to get to know each other better and build collaborative relationships. As such, he or she must ensure that all members participate in team meetings and that they respect the frequency of communication.

In addition to these functions, the e-leader must ensure that the work runs smoothly and that objectives are achieved. He or she must set up work monitoring and control mechanisms adapted to the virtual context (Jawadi, 2008).

These mechanisms will enable it to ensure that deadlines are met and that progress follows the set schedule. Work monitoring allows the e-leader to detect potential problems and intervene in time to solve them. He or she can thus regulate team members' behavior and structure their actions (Jawadi, 2008).

The various functions provided by the e-leader contribute to maintaining trusting relationships by clarifying the contribution of each team member to the work, their level of commitment and their intentions in relation to the team. A good level of trust is maintained by respecting the work, behavior and communication standards of the group as well as by carrying out the activities assigned to each person.

The management skills of e-leaders must adapt to their context and are in turn qualified as virtual (Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003). He or she must develop skills related to virtual collaboration, socialization and communication in addition to performing virtual work.

#### **4 Results and Discussion**

In a virtual team context, MT motivation is a form of mobilizing synergy that ensures the commitment and performance of members from the beginning to the end of the project or assigned task.

The role of the manager is crucial to the success of this motivational function. In addition, the manager of the team in question presents himself as a true leader who maintains teamwork by ensuring that his collaborators participate in various ways. In this context, one of the managers claims: ***"Team managers must, first of all, be available to their employees to foster a sense of human closeness and must also seize opportunities to highlight the excellent work of the members of their teams, do not***

*hesitate to compliment them and, once skills have been demonstrated, they allow them to take initiatives". He adds, "They take a step back to look at the big picture. They motivate their employees by making timely and sincere comments of appreciation. In this case, you can avoid feelings of isolation and frustration that may arise because of the distance, and that's exactly what I try to do with my employees". (Mr. K.M.).*

However, in order to ensure employee commitment, MT has set up a detailed human resources management program that envisages a new policy of motivation and mobilization in favor of teams working remotely through a bonus system based on individual performance and improved professional training, thus enabling the company to minimize the turnover rate as much as possible despite the growth of competition in the telecommunications sector. MT considers the training of its teams as a fundamental investment in human capital that enables it to improve its competitiveness and economic efficiency. In 2019, the company in question implemented 36 training sessions with 150 participants for its staff working remotely.

Since then, the company has followed a policy of continuous training, especially in the field of communication and information technologies, which evolve very quickly. At this level, the HR director declares: ***"From now on, the members of the virtual team must be able to use the best means of communication that the progress of science will be able to provide them. "(Mr. A.B).***

In 2018, an international benchmarking study identified the need to initiate an action plan to ensure greater equity for remote workers. As a result, the company in question has initiated since December 2, 2018, a process for a benefits plan that allows these employees - who are in continuous mobility - to promote their belonging to the company. Among these benefits we can cite: the voluntary retirement plan that would be spread over the next three years.

***"These social actions validated by the general management will have to be able to obtain a support at the level of the career management of members of the virtual teams. Indeed, by evolving in a virtual context, it can be easy to lose sight of promotion opportunities or their position in the company. It will be important for the individual to feel in control of the situation. ...] This recognition of the individual, both professionally and personally, is of paramount importance in order to have this spirit of belonging to the company and consequently obtain maximum team performance. "(Mr. M.B.).***

#### **4.1. Developing autonomy**

Virtual teams are generally horizontal teams with reduced hierarchical levels. The studied team is led directly by a project manager (n+1) and indirectly by the central technical director (n+2). At the second hierarchical level are the other team members who hold equal shares of power since their skills allow them to perform functions of equal importance for the final outcome of the team.

This structure encourages the autonomy of employees who, usually left to their own devices, must assume responsibilities and make decisions that were not theirs when they worked nearby. This autonomy, manifested by the absence of a ***"boss on the back"***, is one of the most remarkable benefits perceived by remote members, as it allows them to improve their individual performance.

***"In opposition to the distant leader, the local leader often tends to be too involved. At any given time, he enters your office, he interferes in your work and gives you suggestions and instructions you don't like. However, we need a margin of autonomy to improve our individual performance. "Explains one of the employees (Mr. B.N.).***



However, consultation with the manager is essential, especially in the event of difficulties in achieving fixed objectives or in dealing with unforeseen incidents. In this case the employee is expected to contact his line manager to help him take the right decisions because it is the latter who has the functions of control, coordination and harmonization of individual contributions. This was supported by one of the staff members, who quite rightly states:

***"Among the most important criteria for recruitment is autonomy, getting by, moving forward, building one's own tools. That's what's interesting. And at the same time, you can always ask for advice. (...) Sometimes you have to limit autonomous decisions, especially for people who don't have a lot of leeway to make decisions. In any case, in my opinion, autonomy must be followed by support from the manager. "(Mr. A.B).***

#### 4.2. Leadership

***"Leadership skills are the key to managing a virtual team"***. This is how one of the managers spread the word by asking him a question about the role of leadership in animating virtual teams and achieving their performance. However, the managers interviewed claimed that leadership skills in virtual teams are different from those needed in the old management style.

In the old model, the role of the leader is to give directives to his or her subordinates who are physically present. Since he had direct control over them, it was relatively simple for him to monitor the team's progress. Team members could be disciplined, involved, or rewarded with a performance-based bonus. This is not the case with the new team form. When working with virtual teams, the ability to influence people through logic, personal balance, and common sense is more important than the ability to give orders.

***"When you don't have a direct and regular visibility on people and when you find yourself in an office where there are no people you are managing, you are going to think about changing your classic leadership style and you are going to adopt an e-leadership style that will allow you to lead people from a distance". (Mr. K.M.).***

Contrary to his traditional attributions of organization and direction, the leader must, from now on, encourage creativity, encourage exchanges, orchestrate and above all consecrate the spirit of "playing together", (...). For the manager, this pilot role is new.

***Of course, the leader must have the basic qualifications to be responsible for a team, such as the ability to delegate, plan, manage stress and time, etc. "Of course, the leader must have the basic qualifications to be in charge of a team, such as the ability to delegate, plan, manage stress and time, etc. When a leader is not with his team on a regular basis, his collaborators will use their own judgment "our leader is authoritarian, he is not yet aware that objectives and responsibilities must be shared". (Mr. N.C.).***

#### 5 Conclusions

This monograph considers a situation of a virtual team working remotely within the company 'MT' which presents it self as a multinational company occupying the position of leader in the telecommunications sector in Morocco.

The setting up of this type of team - virtual team - has been linked to the company's ability to transform a very often static organization into a flexible one. It is a major challenge that led the company to ensure team motivation through new legal, managerial and organizational procedures and regulations in order to

guarantee the performance of remote members.

Motivation is assumed by the manager and the general management. The manager is supposed to be a true e-leader capable of ensuring the autonomy of members, influencing people through logic, personal balance and common sense. The general management is partly responsible for the fulfillment of the motivation. Indeed, the company in question uses regulatory and legal frameworks to motivate the virtual team members and guarantee their commitments, namely: training programs, benefit plans, social actions, career plans, leisure activities, union rights etc.

As interesting as these results are, we must not lose sight of the limitations of this study.

Our research has for the moment only an exploratory aim. The results obtained can in no way approve or validate hypotheses. Moreover, it should be noted that the mode of "selection" of respondents calls into question the internal validity of the data collected. Are the opinions that emerge, which are admittedly fairly homogeneous, shared by the entire organization? As with any case study, the question of external validity also arises: can the observations made be generalized to other companies? What is the impact of contingent aspects? More case studies are needed to continue to identify the key success variables on which the best practice publications seem to converge, as opposed to analyzing overall performance.

Other analyses, cross-functional ones, are also necessary today to measure the impact, in terms of overall performance, of the implementation of virtual teams and the development of motivation among remote employees. In other words, the knowledge of cohesion factors to be put in place to ensure the success of virtual teams still needs to be improved and offers many research prospects.

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