The Organization’s Role in Global Virtual Team Leaders’ Possibilities to Successfully Lead the Team across Its Lifecycle

Karin Väyrynen
University of Oulu
karin.vayrynen@oulu.fi

Juha Aalto
University of Oulu
jpaalto@mail.student.oulu.fi

Abstract

Leadership has been recognized to have a big influence on global virtual team (GVT) success, but the influence of the organizational context on GVT leaders’ possibilities to succeed in leading GVTs in the team’s different lifecycle stages has been omitted. In this study, which was conducted as a qualitative multiple case study, we identified five factors of organizational support which influence these possibilities: the way in which the GVT is created, the purpose for which the GVT is created, the availability of funding for the GVT, the amount of control over the GVT’s ways of working, and the way the GVT is being ended. In addition, we provide a model which consists of organizational support and GVT leaders’ skills and which could guide future research on GVT leadership.

1. Introduction

In today’s economy, where experts of a certain area are located all around the world, the use of virtual teams has become a common practice. However, the creation of effective virtual teams represents certain challenges for the organization. These challenges include the creation of trust in a virtual environment [7], communication across time zones [14] with little or no face-to-face contact [7] and across different cultures with help of information technology, as well as the creation of team-spirit and motivation [2]. Previous research found that leadership is an important factor to virtual team effectiveness [14][28]. Compared to face-to-face team leaders, virtual team leaders have to be better at facilitating the team processes. As virtual team leadership has long been neglected, more studies are needed to increase our understanding on how to lead virtual teams effectively [11].

A large part of previous studies on virtual team leadership was conducted in a university setting, using students in virtual team settings (e.g. [1][11][12][13][14][28]). These studies allow insight into inter-team dynamics and the effect of leadership on virtual team success, but they do not allow us to gain an understanding of how the organizational context influences the virtual team leader’s possibilities to lead the team across its lifecycle. As previous research emphasized, in order to understand how virtual teams can be successful, there is a need for studies conducted in organizational settings [17].

Most of the previous research on virtual team leadership has focused on studying how the team leader’s way of leading the virtual team influences virtual team success (e.g. [6]). Even though there is evidence that the organizational context has an influence on the efficiency and successful operation of global virtual teams (GVT) [9][24] and employee involvement [5], to our knowledge no study exists that would specifically study the effect that the organizational environment has on the team leader’s possibilities to actually lead his or her virtual team successfully across the whole lifecycle of the virtual team. This represents a clear research gap.

With this research, we make a first step towards closing this gap by studying the question “How does the organizational support affect GVT leaders’ possibilities to succeed in leading effective GVTs across their lifecycle?” To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative case study and interviewed six team leaders and four team members who were located at the same site in a large international organization, but who belonged to nine different virtual teams.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we present the theoretical background of the study, consisting of a review of past research on virtual teams, and on leading GVTs across their lifecycle. Section 3 presents the research methodology. In Section 4, we present the results of our study, which we discuss in Section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Virtual teams

The first virtual teams were created in the 1990s [13]. They were not intentionally created, but the
development of technology lead to telephone- and virtual conferences [3]. Several definitions of virtual teams exist, but common to these definitions is that virtual teams “consist of (a) two or more persons who (b) collaborate interactively to achieve common goals, while (c) at least one of the team members works at a different location, organization, or at a different time so that (d) communication and coordination is predominantly based on electronic communication media (email, fax, phone, video conference, etc.)” [9]. GVTs fulfill the characteristics of virtual teams, but usually are dispersed across different continents or countries [13].

Virtual teams have several advantages: they enable reduced travel time and cost, as well as the recruitment of talented employees, promote different areas, allow building diverse teams, and can reduce discrimination [3]. Several challenges have been identified in the context of GVTs. Kayworth and Leidner [14], as well as Nader et al. [22], conducted an extensive review of previous research on GVTs and identified several challenges of virtual teams which relate to the following categories: communication, culture, logistics, and technology. Communication challenges refer to challenges that stem from the need to use mainly information technology for communication where traditional social mechanisms are lost or distorted, and communication dynamics such as facial expressions and gestures are lost or altered [14]. Virtual teams are also vulnerable to communication breakdowns, conflicts and power struggles [22]. Others emphasized in relation to communication challenges the lack of media richness [11], challenges in creating trust due to very limited or all together missing face-to-face interaction between team members [7], and the need to communicate well in virtual teams [27]. However, also ‘over-communication’ has been identified as a challenge in GVTs [20]. Culture challenges include misunderstandings stemming from the different cultural background of GVT members, unrealistic cultural expectations, as well as the need for greater communication skills (see also [23]). Logistics challenges refer to e.g. the difficulties in arranging meetings with people working in different time zones (see also [23]). Technology challenges refer to the need that GVT members have to be skilled in a number of technologies (see also [27]). Also challenges stemming from problems with communication technology [4][24] and from technology adaptation [21] have been emphasized.

But how can these challenges be overcome? Previous research argues that leadership is a very important factor to virtual team effectiveness [14][28]. Therefore, we will next briefly review past research on virtual team leadership to identify ways in which virtual team leaders can try to overcome or decrease the challenges identified above.

### 2.2. Leading virtual teams across their lifecycle

In the previous section, we reviewed challenges for GVT effectiveness. Previous research has identified key activities of and success factors for virtual team leaders which play a crucial role in overcoming the challenges related to GVTs. These factors include communication, culture, logistics, technology, understanding, role clarity, and leadership attitude [14], and they appear across the lifecycle of virtual teams.

Several studies have focused on the lifecycle of face-to-face (e.g. [29]) and virtual teams (e.g. [2][6][9]), as well as on stages in creating and sustaining trust in virtual teams which show certain similarities to the overall virtual team lifecycle (e.g. [7]). While Furst et al. [6] distinguish four phases (Formation, Storming, Norming, and Performing), Hertel et al. [9] identify five stages (Preparations, Launch, Performance Management, Team Development, and Disbanding). The different stages of the lifecycles can be interrelated with feedback loops [9], and the activities listed in these different lifecycle models are partly overlapping. According to Greenberg et al. [7], the creation of trust happens in five stages: Establishing the Team, Inception, Organizing, Transition, and Accomplishing the Task.

When comparing Kent’s [15] distinction between managing and leading competences, Furst et al.’s [6] managerial interventions during the virtual project team lifecycle, Greenberg et al.’s [7] distinction between manager’s actions and leader’s actions in creating and sustaining trust in virtual teams, and Hertel et al.’s [9] key activities in the lifecycle of virtual team management (which is based on an extensive review of previous research), one cannot help but notice the resemblance of many of the listed activities and competences. Table 1 summarizes the competences or activities required from virtual team leaders during the virtual team’s lifecycle based on Hertel et al. [9] (for a detailed description of these different lifecycle stages and tasks, see [9]). In addition, Table 1 includes some selected references to studies that emphasize the importance of the same type of activities for virtual team success.

Kent [15] defines that the purpose of leading is “to create direction and the unified will to pursue it through the development of people’s thinking and valuing”, whereas the purpose of managing is “to determine and compare alternative uses and allocations of resources and to select that alternative which is most energy effective toward accomplishing or producing a product, end or goal”. He further argues that the
processes related to leading are “creating vision, aligning people with the team, managing their “self”, recognizing and rewarding, and communicating meaning and importance of the vision”, whereas the processes related to managing are “planning, organizing, controlling, and coordinating”.

For the most part, previous research on virtual teams uses the terms management and leadership interchangeably. There have been some attempts to create a distinction between leadership and management activities (e.g. [7][15][16]), but it is still not possible to clearly classify a certain activity as either being a management or a leadership activity. We will therefore not specifically distinguish between management and leadership and use the terms leading and managing interchangeably in the present research.

Table 1. Virtual team leaders’ activities across the team’s lifecycle (as in [9])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages and activities</th>
<th>see also</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparations stage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop mission statement</td>
<td>[2][6][15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel selection</td>
<td>[2][7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task design</td>
<td>[7][15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards system</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>[2][7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational integration</td>
<td>[6]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Launch stage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building with e.g. kick-off workshop</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting acquainted</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal clarification</td>
<td>[10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of intra-team rules</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance management stage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>[2][7][15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation of communication</td>
<td>[2][7][15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance of motivation/emotion</td>
<td>[2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge management</td>
<td>[10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team development stage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of needs/deficits</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual and/or team training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of training effects</td>
<td>[7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disbanding stage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of achievements</td>
<td>[2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-integration of team members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Research methodology

The research was conducted as an empirical, qualitative case study to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and challenges in virtual team leadership. A case study is suitable for research that is trying to answer “how” and “why” questions about a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident [31]. Robey et al. [25] point out that ‘case studies provide the greatest detail on the role of experience’. As we are trying to answer how the organizational support affects GVT leaders’ possibilities to succeed in leading effective GVTs across their lifecycle, and as we are studying the phenomenon within its real-life context by interviewing leaders and members of real organizational virtual teams, the case study approach is a suitable research method.

3.1. Case description

Alpha is a multi-national large corporation in the ICT industry which has grown quickly in the 1990s and 2000s and currently employs people in more than 100 countries. The company conducts research and product development mainly in Asia, Europe and North America. Alpha’s headquarters are in Europe.

We selected Alpha as a case company due to its long history in using GVT settings, and due to the possibility of studying the experiences of several team members and team leaders who work in the same type of context (i.e. at the same site) while nevertheless belonging to different virtual teams. We studied nine GVTs which all were created to support certain R&D activities and to maintain, and in some cases also develop, certain software tools at different Alpha sites.

3.2. Data collection

Between October and November 2011, we interviewed 6 team leaders (TL) and 4 team members (TM) which all work in organization Alpha at the same site in Europe. Table 2 summarizes information on the GVTs the different interviewees belonged to. Only TL2 and TM3 belonged to the same team, and this virtual team still exists. All other members and leaders belonged to different teams which all have already been disbanded and therefore allowed to look in retrospective at the whole team lifecycle. Therefore, the data represents the views of persons who are all working at the same site, but who belong to nine distinct virtual teams.

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, we interviewed both leaders and members of GVTs. Interviews with team members lasted between 22 and 45 minutes (on average 34 minutes), interviews with team leaders lasted between 35 and 62 minutes (on average 52 minutes). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, resulting in a total of 7.5 hours of recordings and 71 pages of transcripts. Interviews represent an important data source in case study research [30].

Interview questions related to all stages in the virtual team lifecycle (see [9]). We conducted ten semi-structured interviews and asked about the
challenges, advantages and disadvantages interviewees see in relation to virtual teams. For each stage in the GVT lifecycle we asked what interviewees see important concerning leadership in that stage, what kind of challenges they faced, and how that stage was implemented in their team. In addition, we asked about interviewees’ motivation to lead or participate in the GVT, the role of information technology, and how virtual teams should be lead. We did not specifically ask about the organization’s role in GVT management, but our findings, which we present and discuss in Sections 4 and 5, emerged from the data.

Table 2. GVT background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Part of GVT for</th>
<th># of members</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TL1</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 locations in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL2</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL3</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America, Far East, India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL4</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Europe, North America, Far East, India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL5</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL6</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, 200 indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM1</td>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM2</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 locations in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM3</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Europe, Asia, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM4</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Around the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Data analysis

When analyzing the interview data, we used the challenges of GVTs (communication, culture, logistics, and technology, see Section 2.1) and the virtual team leader’s activities (see Table 1) as pre-nodes. Next, we analyzed which activities and ways leaders used to respond to these challenges, as well as what leaders should do to overcome the challenges in the team members’ opinion. Finally, we analyzed which of these activities and challenges were influenced by the organizational context, and how that context influenced the leaders’ possibilities to overcome the challenges. Even though we identified almost all of the leaders’ activities listed in Table 1 in the empirical data, in the present paper we present and discuss only activities where the organizational context proved to play an essential role. Next, we will present the results of our analysis.

4. Discussion of Results

In this section, we present the results of our study. Based on our analysis of the data, we identified where and how in the lifecycle the organizational context had a strong influence on the team leader’s possibilities to succeed in effectively leading the GVT. We also present some direct citations from the interviews to support our findings, and will add information about which team leader (TL1-TL6) or team member (TM1-TM4) has made the statement to allow the reader to put the citations into the team context (see Table 2).

4.1. Preparation stage

In the preparation stage of the virtual team lifecycle, the organization’s influence on the GVT leader’s possibilities to lead the team effectively was emphasized in relation to two activities: personnel selection and mission statement.

We found that in some cases the team leaders had a say in the team member selection, but in most virtual teams someone else but the team leader decided about who should become a member in the team, and why. One team leader explained what type of persons he would choose for his team (TL6): “Trying to find people who network easily. Maybe members with an extrovert nature or personality are the ones you should look for, but still so that the technical competence is the deciding factor.” We found that members were selected to the team based on very different criteria. Most of the teams were established with a certain purpose in mind, and in these cases team members were selected foremost based on their technical know-how (e.g. TL4, TM1-TM4). In one team, also team and social skills were considered in team member selection, but only second to technical skills. One team leader expressed that choosing team members solely based on technical skills represents certain challenges for communication within the team (TL3): “Typically, when they are technical people, the priority is not always to take the most social people, in which case everyone has certain gaps in their communication skills. These gaps then appear, and the leader and the organization would have to be aware of that.”

Not all team leaders had a chance to create a clear mission statement. One team, for example, was created without a clear purpose (TL1): “The organization was renewed and teams were created. Some of these teams were virtual teams. Some people were left over that did not really fit into any team, and therefore a so-called virtual team was established. This team was a bit out of line with the greater strategy.” Another team’s members were selected based on their location, not based on their know-how (TL5).

4.2. Launch stage

In the launch stage of the virtual team lifecycle, the organization’s influence on the GVT leader’s
possibility to lead the team effectively was emphasized in relation to two activities: the kick-off workshop, and goal clarification. All interviewees emphasized the importance of face-to-face meetings. As one member explained, the face-to-face kick-off meeting increased his motivation to work in the GVT (TM2): “I was more motivated after the face-to-face meeting than before it, because there it became clear what my own tasks are and what is expected of us in the end.”

For team leaders, face-to-face meetings represent a way to help tackle challenges related to communication in the GVT by providing the basis for how well the team members will communicate later on with each other. One member explained (TM3): “After you have got to know someone in reality for some time, it’s easier to understand his train of thought also over the phone, in that kind of virtual meeting.” Also a team leader mentioned the importance of face-to-face meetings to support communication between team members later on (TL6): “It means that if you have met someone face-to-face, you know and understand his competences and know in what type of technical things you should approach that person. When a common network is created, the threshold to call or chat is significantly smaller.” In addition, one team leader pointed out that team members get more committed to each other if they have an opportunity to meet (TL3): “If team members meet face-to-face, they get a feeling of responsibility towards other team members and towards the work that has to be done – you don’t let your colleagues hang in the air.”

However, not all of the teams had the possibility to meet face-to-face. In one case, not even the team leader got the opportunity to meet the members of his team during the team’s lifecycle. This was due to increased financial pressure on Alpha, which resulted in travel restrictions within the company. As a result, virtual teams did not have an opportunity to meet any more. One member expressed that the lack of face-to-face meetings had a negative impact on his motivation (TM3): “The fact that there were no face to face meetings any more has decreased my motivation.”

All four members and several leaders emphasized that it is especially important to get a clear understanding about the goals of the team when starting the team. This was also recognized as being essential to keep the GVT members committed to the GVT, especially in cases where the GVT members were only “part-time” members (TL 6): “The common goal has to be clear: if it is not clear, the local sub-optimal goals start to define the member’s work and focus is on the local advantage instead of the global organization.”

4.3. Performance management stage

In the performance management stage, the organization’s influence on the GVT leader’s possibilities was emphasized in relation to maintaining GVT members’ motivation. In fact, at this stage several challenges related to how to keep team members motivated result from decisions and ways of working in previous stages.

For example, if team members do not get a chance to meet face-to-face because of cost savings, it has a negative influence on their motivation. This in turn makes it more difficult for the team leader to keep members motivated. Also the importance of clarifying the goals and driving the team towards a common goal has been emphasized for both team members’ and leaders’ motivation. As mentioned above, this is difficult if the team has been established without the organization having a clear goal or purpose for the team, and this makes motivating the team more difficult.

The importance of having a possibility to visit different team members’ sites in times of organizational uncertainty to get a better understanding of the environment and as a result to be better able to support and motivate these members was explained by one team leader (TL4): “We had uncertain times, and there the motivation has been changing, in a different way at different sites. Different people have different situations. Sometimes there is the situation that some people are up and some are down. You have to acknowledge what the feeling is at the sites. This is difficult without being at that place. For sure the best thing would have been to visit the place e.g. once every half a year to see how it looks like. To see how the site overall is, not just this team but the whole site.” However, this is only possible if the organization has the financial resources to enable such visits.

One GVT leader, whose direct subordinates were leaders of other teams, explained what the prerequisites were to establish an effective team (TL6): “My task as a manager is to create a work environment where there is a chance to succeed. Giving a chance to succeed means that there is the necessary amount of resources, the necessary amount of competences and capacity to do some work task and that there is a clear enough goal of where we are going.”

4.4. Team development stage

The team development stage refers to supporting virtual teams by personnel and team development interventions [9]. In this stage, the organization’s influence on the GVT leader’s possibility to lead the
Team members emphasized several things they see as important when the GVT is disbanded. First of all, keeping the lines to other team members open, keeping the network alive, was seen as important in case of questions later on. Ensuring that someone takes care of the GVT’s previous work tasks also after the team is disbanded, as well as making customers understand the effects of ending the team were emphasized.

Team leaders emphasized the importance of decreasing uncertainty and still giving some last feedback. “Communication is of course important, so that everyone knows what happens and why, and what this change means for the person and regarding the future. I think that minimizing uncertainty about the continuation is important.”

Another leader explained that in his opinion it was important for him that he had some time after he was informed that his team will be disbanded to think about how to present the news to the team members. He spent several days thinking about the positive aspects of the disbandment, so that he then was able to first explain to the team in general why the team was ended, and to also explain why a certain member of the GVT would work in a specific setting in future.

However, not in all cases the organization offered the GVT leader a possibility to handle the disbanding properly. In one team, for example, the team leader had to leave the team due to organizational restructuring, and no replacement had been offered by the organization. This lead to a situation where one of the members informally took over the role of the GVT leader, without knowing whether the team was still supposed to work together and for how long. Based in this, that member pointed out: “And one important thing would be to get clarity about when the whole work stops.”

5. Discussion

Based on our empirical analysis, we will discuss the main findings next. First, we identified five factors through which organizations influence the possibilities of virtual team leaders to effectively lead GVTs. Second, we will discuss the connection between organizational support and team leader skills and suggest a model which opens up possible future research questions and can help guide future research on GVT success and effectiveness. It is important to point out that in our research culture challenges, logistics challenges, and technology challenges were not influenced by the organizational context, but depended on the GVT leader’s skills to overcome these challenges. Therefore, in the present study we will not discuss these challenges in more detail, but will focus on the main findings next.
on discussing the challenges where the organization had a clear impact: communication and motivation.

5.1. Five factors through which organizations influence the possibilities of virtual team leaders to effectively lead GVTs

One of the most important and most difficult tasks of GVT leaders regarding the team’s members is to support them and keep them motivated [2].

According to our findings, the organization has a direct influence on the GVT leader’s chances to apply his or her leadership abilities and to lead the team effectively mainly through five factors of organizational support:

1) the way in which the GVT is created
2) the purpose for which the GVT is created
3) the availability of funding for the GVT
4) the amount of control over the GVTs ways of working
5) the way the team is being ended

The way in which the GVT is created has an influence on how well the team can work together at later stages of the GVT lifecycle. Previous research has repeatedly emphasized how important it is that the team leader selects suitable members to the team [9][7] during the Preparation stage. In order to ensure project success, virtual team leaders have to choose team members based on a combination of member know-how, background, and based on their familiarity with the work process in virtual teams [2]. However, as we found, often the team leader has no influence on team member selection, which therefore decreases already in the beginning stages the chance to be successful. We also found that team members very often are chosen based on purely technical and domain know-how. Even though a team leader might acknowledge the importance of also considering social skills and communication skills, as suggested by [2], we found that in practice he often does not have the opportunity to apply these criteria because he is not given a say in member selection. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for the team leader in later stages when he has to ensure that team members are communicating with each other, keeping each other up to date, and share information, as emphasized in previous research.

Also the purpose for which the GVT is created influences the GVT leader’s possibilities to lead the team effectively. Previous research emphasized the importance for GVT success to have a mission for the GVT (i.e. a reason for why the team is established) at the Preparations stage [9][7], and to clarify the GVT goals to the members during the Launch stage [6][9]. Also the team leaders and members we interviewed strongly supported this view. However, in our research we found that sometimes, GVTs are established without the organization having a mission for the GVT. A GVT might be assembled simply to somehow tie together a group of people who work at different sites and whose tasks do not support the general line of business or strategy of the organization. For the team leader, it is much more difficult to clarify the GVT goals to team members if he is not provided with a team mission by the organization. The clarification of goals has also been seen as one major motivator for GVT members, and if team leaders do not have a mission based on which team goals can be communicated to the team members, it might have a negative impact on the GVTs motivation, making the team leader’s job more challenging during the different stages of the lifecycle. Of course it can be argued that a team that was created without a clear purpose maybe is not even expected to be ‘successful’ or effective. However, an organization should think also about possible negative impacts in future: if employees work in a GVT without a mission and goals, without being expected to succeed, it might have negative impacts when these same members or leaders should work in another GVT at a later point in time.

Previous research also emphasized challenges arising from the creation of local sub-teams. Staples and Cameron [26] caution organizations not to create intentionally or unintentionally sub-groups in GVTs, as problems arise when communication that stays invisible to other team members happens within sub-groups and therefore hinders overall communication in the GVT. In addition, it has been argued that virtual teams often struggle to balance their GVT’s and local organization’s demands [6]. Our study found that from a different perspective, the team members’ local sub-group’s goals might become more important than the GVT’s goals, if these GVT goals are not communicated well by the team leader. Also this can be a result of a missing overall GVT mission set by the higher-level organization.

The importance of the availability of funding for the GVT has been identified previously [6], referring to [18]). In our study, the lack of funding did not only have negative impacts on the team leader’s chances to succeed in leading the team during the stage in the lifecycle where the funding shortage was directly visible. For example, where team members could not meet face-to-face during the Launch stage due to travel restrictions and funding shortage, the negative impacts could be observed during several lifecycle stages in form of communication and motivation challenges. In addition, team leaders felt that it would be important to also have an opportunity to visit their team members’ sites to get an understanding of the local situation.
The amount of control over the GVTs ways of working, defined by the higher-level organization, proved to be an important factor influencing the GVT leader’s possibilities to lead the team effectively. It has been argued that for virtual team success it is very important that the team leader shows trust in the team members’ abilities [7], and that team members are empowered to make decisions to quickly be able to respond to e.g. changing market needs [10]. Also here the organization can create big challenges for the team leader. As our study showed, in cases where the organization does not only define what has to be achieved by the GVT, but also how solutions have to be implemented, the team leader has little or no opportunity to let the team members work independently and get the feeling of success. We want to emphasize that especially in expert teams like GVTs, for team members the possibility to apply skills and to develop their know-how further is particularly important, as this keeps their motivation high. Team leaders, whose task is to facilitate this, can only succeed if the higher organization gives them enough ‘space’ and allows them to empower team members.

Finally, the way the team is being ended is an important aspect for future GVT team leaders’ possibilities to succeed in effectively leading the GVT. As Paré and Dubé [24], referring to Haywood [8], argue: “past experiences with other forms of virtual arrangements […] can have major impacts on current efforts to develop effective virtual team dynamics”. In the context of our findings this could mean that if the organization does not have a clear plan for what will happen to the team members after the GVT is being ended, or if the team leader is not given the time and opportunity to think about how to present the decision about ending the GVT and to revisit the successes and lessons learned with the members, it is difficult for the team leader to limit members’ uncertainty about the future. It might be that team members are then left with a very bad ‘taste’ about working in a GVT, and this can have a very negative effect on these members’ attitude when working as part of another GVT in future, and making this future GVT leader’s efforts to motivate the team much more difficult.

5.2. Organizational context vs. team leader skills

In general, past research on activities conducted by and skills possessed by virtual team leaders that help to successfully lead the team throughout its lifecycle (e.g. [2][6][9][29]) implicitly assume that leaders also get a chance to apply these skills and to conduct these activities. However, as our research showed, this is not necessarily the case. We showed that the organization has an important role in this, and argue that in cases where organizational support is missing, the GVT leader has to be able to somehow compensate the challenges arising from the lacking organizational support.

To achieve effective support from management for GVTs, it is important that the success of the GVT is directly linked to organizational goals and strategy [4]. But what if the GVT is created by the organization without any linkage to the overall organizational goals and strategy? Leaders of such teams are confronted with a very difficult situation, and it can be expected that leading such a team demands immensely more effort and skills from the team leader to keep the team motivated than from the leader of a team who pursues an important strategic endeavor and can count on full support by the organization.

Based on the results of our study, we propose the following framework, which also could be used to guide future research (see Figure 1). We argue that future studies evaluating and researching leadership activities and skills in GVTs also have to take into account the factors with which organizations influence the GVT leader’s possibility to effectively lead GVTs. We believe that the prerequisites for GVT success are as much dependent on the leader’s skills as they are on the organizational context the GVT leader has to operate in. We argue that GVTs who have both high organizational support (e.g. by having sufficient funding to arrange face-to-face meetings and visit team members, by becoming the leader of a team which has a clear mission and which supports the overall organizational strategy etc.) and a leader with high leadership skills have the prerequisites for GVT success, while teams that have low organizational support and a leader with low leadership skills are much more likely to fail.

![Figure 1. Combinations of organizational support and team leader’s skills](image)
However, with teams that have a leader with high leadership skills, but who does not have any organizational support, or teams that have a leader with low leadership skills, but who gets full organizational support, it is more difficult to predict success or failure. For example, it does not mean that a team who is getting high organizational support will automatically work more efficiently and be more successful than a team who is lacking that support. Here, the team leader’s skills as identified in previous research (e.g. [2][6][9][29]) play an essential role. The best organizational support will not make up for a leader’s missing skills in GVT leadership.

We also want to emphasize that within the same organization, different team leaders can be confronted with very different organizational support and contexts. In the organization we studied, team leaders were confronted with very different GVT conditions, for example: 1) the organization (higher level) identifies a need for the GVT, creates the mission, and based on that selects the team leader and members; 2) the organization selects the team leader and announces the mission, and the team leader can select suitable members; and 3) the organization chooses members and a leader for the GVT, but does not have a clear mission or goal for the team.

This means that there is no one way of leading GVTs, and team leaders have to adapt their way of leading to the organizational context and conditions. As Lee-Kelley [19] expressed it: “No single style is right for all managers under all circumstances”.

6. Conclusions

In the present research, we studied the role of organizational support on the challenges that GVT leaders face across the virtual team’s lifecycle. Our research has two main findings. First, we found that organizations can influence a GVT leader’s chances to succeed through five factors: the way the GVT is created, the purpose for which the GVT was created, availability of funding for the GVT, amount of control over the GVTs ways of working, and the way the GVT is ended. Second, we proposed a framework that could be used by future research to study in more detail whether and how lacking organizational support can be made up for by the GVT leader’s leadership skills, and what the relation between these two variables is.

Our study has practical implications. If an organization wants its GVTs to have a realistic chance to succeed, it has to offer the GVT leader the kind of organizational support that also gives the leader a chance to succeed. As Beranek et al. [2] point out, “virtual team leaders should support and motivate individual team members actively to ensure their participation during critical project stages.” However, in order to be able to motivate team members, the GVT leader has to be motivated, too, and organizations should put special emphasis on creating an environment that also keeps the GVT leader motivated.

In addition to the research implications we discussed in Section 5, we believe it is important that future research on GVTs, when evaluating the effect of GVT leadership on the success of GVTs, takes into consideration also the organizational support the GVT leaders receive, as this can have a big effect on GVT success.

The fact that this study was conducted at one site in one organization can be seen as a limitation, even though this was important from a research design perspective, as the specific organizational culture and context can influence interviewees’ perception.

Future research could study whether different organizational support factors would prove to be important in different cultural settings. Even though our study gives some first insights into the organization’s role in supporting or hindering GVT leadership success, more research is needed to create a deeper understanding on the mechanisms between the context and support the organization offers GVT leaders, and the level of leadership skills these GVT leaders possess. Future research could study what kind of organizational environment would support the GVT leader’s work.

7. References


