

Improving team effectiveness in tech companies with different countries of origin

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to exploit what the factors for team effectiveness in technological companies from different countries are. One aspect of team effectiveness that is important to the overall team performance is communication. Additional factors that influence team results are task distribution, goal clearance, and team commitment. To test a model developed for measuring team effectiveness in IT companies a piece of empirical research was conducted in 2017. Although the participants work in one and the same industry, they are part of companies with different countries of origin, organizational values and teamwork fostering practices. The research results show differences in some of the factors from the model for team effectiveness depending on the country of origin of the company. Meanwhile, there are some similarities identified in the research sample related to the challenges that teams face in the IT field.

Key words: team effectiveness, IT industry, model, team performance and communication, cross-culture.

Introduction

IT companies in Europe and Bulgaria show good business results, rapid dynamics and quick changes. The Information technology sector, which includes high-tech organizations, could improve its results via human capital development and coordination of its strategy with other economic sectors. Statistical results show that the organizations in the sector are characterized by relatively stable economic performance, good employment rates and working conditions. One of the key challenges, however, is the development of people by encouraging learning and by developing social skills [1]. From the point of view of organizational psychology, the effectiveness of the team is among the main focus of theory and research on the phenomenon, regardless of the economic sector. Not only processes related to internal integration are important for the successful operation of companies. External adaptation is also important and the mechanisms that contribute to this are interesting for researchers. Among the factors that influence internal integration and external adaptation, we can outline team effectiveness and strategic orientations. We explore these two factors in the current article.

Theoretical observations

In order to build strong and successful teams, it is vital for the organizations to be aware of the fact that no good teams are being created in the blink of an eye. It is crucial to have sufficient time and appropriate guidance. Team members need appropriate leadership and support from their leaders and colleagues. In addition, the organization should promote a culture of teamwork so that employees feel comfortable in the environment in which they work [2]. The ability to achieve high-quality work teams depends on the factors that affect the team's performance. Team effectiveness can be defined as "the capacity a team has to accomplish the goals or objectives administered by an authorized personnel or the organization" [3]. Most of the group's effectiveness research focuses on factors within the group itself and "does not take into account the impact of the organizational environment, inter-group relations and other aspects that are beyond the scope and space of the group" [4]. It is interesting to note that, according to a survey by the same authors, group efficiency is the highest among private organizations and the lowest among non-governmental organizations. Whether it is about efficiency in groups or teams, the phenomenon has specific features that will be discussed in the next part of the paper. Team effectiveness is a multidimensional construct that includes

performance (quantity and quality of team results) and behavior (for example engagement and commitment) of team members [5]. Research on team effectiveness in technology companies contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon and provide a good starting point for the present study. For example, Doolen explores management processes related to goal setting at team level, goal alignment, and resource allocation [6]. These processes are of particular importance for technology organizations where a link between production and engineering resources needs to be maintained to ensure the production of innovative products that are competitive on the market. Doolen develops a model for determining the factors of the organization that influence the effectiveness of the teams. According to the model the independent variables are as follows:

- The organizational context - management processes, organizational culture, organizational systems;
- Team composition (structure), team task and team processes as a mediator variable. [7]

Having a supportive organizational environment is seen as one of the key factors for team effectiveness. Given the dynamics of companies - restructuring, reducing or rediscovering jobs, the new roles that emerge are mostly team-oriented. Accordingly, teamwork skills become one of the most popular. Organizations become more and more flat, more striving for effectiveness and flexibility. An important feature of effectiveness is meeting customer needs. Work and projects are becoming more and more complex, with less time and bigger scope. All of these factors combined increase the difficulty of one person performing one job. Consequently, in today's workplace teams are a core unit [8].

For teams to work well, factors such as time, communication, and facilitating organizational context become crucial. Among the factors that influence the way teams work and their effectiveness are the organizational context and structure [9]. In addition, team performance, clear objectives, well-defined and understood tasks, communication and conflict management, organizational context, shared mental models sharing knowledge and information, unified sources of information, common understanding are important too, especially in technology companies. It is important to have a good understanding and understanding of the roles in the team, the relationship between the team members and the team commitment. The following factors are used to create a Team effectiveness questionnaire that will be adapted to tech companies:

- team performance (including goals, task, result, communication, process) - team performance can be defined as product or result of team actions that satisfy external clients [10];
- team commitment - the power of participation and identification with the reference groups [11]
- shared mental models - represent the way knowledge is organized or organized into models that are stored in memory [12].

Mental models allow people to develop a sense of their world by building work schemes. In turn, the schemes make it easier for team members to access the information needed to make forecasts, to understand the phenomena, and decide on action. [13]. At the team level, shared mental models represent the overlap or similarity between members' thoughts about the different aspects of their team and tasks. The mental model is an information processing mechanism that supports the description, explanation and prediction of our environment [14]. SMM can be

summarized in two types - related to the task and related to the team. The first type relates to the task and helps to share task-specific knowledge among team members, while the second type refers to the team and the distribution of the expertise of the individuals in the team.

In IT, everything changes very quickly, and as Tannenbaum (2012) [15] says about team trends: instead of thinking about traditional team types, perhaps we can best understand teams by studying the challenges, pressure, requirements, leading motivators and beneficial factors with real teams in dynamic conditions. Organizational culture largely influences teams in dynamic software companies. Value orientations can prevent or facilitate teamwork and, depending on the prevailing type, different processes and practices related to human resource management, leadership styles, and overall integration of strategic decisions in day-to-day work of teams can be introduced.

Research method

In order to understand what the specifics of team effectiveness in high tech companies are we decided to conduct a study on the Bulgarian market. For the purpose of the study, we used quantitative research method and applied one Questionnaire as follows:

- Team effectiveness Questionnaire, containing 28 items.

For the statistical analysis of the data we used SPSS program, version 22.

Team effectiveness is measured by a questionnaire created for the purposes of the study by the authors of this article. It contains 3 factors and a total of 28 themes with a Likert type answer scale (1=Totally disagree, 5=Totally agree). The Team effectiveness questionnaire factors are as follows:

- Team Performance - at the beginning of our survey and the design of the questionnaire, we have a "Team Performance" scale, which is subject to further examination and analysis in the current study with the entire sample. As originally set, the scale contains a total of 15 statements with a 5-degree Likert-type response scale. The team performance scale is based on the literature review [16], the statements being made after further consultation with five experts in various positions (including management) from IT companies to reflect the specificities of the IT companies' work. As a result of factor and team analyzes, the scale is divided into two subscale: "Team processes and interaction" and "Team results".

- Team commitment - 3 items with a 5-degree Likert type answer scale. The scale is adapted by Kang et al. [17], which in turn is borrowed from Bishop and Scott [18].

- Shared mental models - 10 items with 5-degree Likert-type response scale. To further investigate team effectiveness, Kang and Colleagues Shared Mental Models (SMM) Scale was applied to reveal the impact of cognitive performance of team members on the effectiveness of their work. The questionnaire distinguishes between two types of mental models - task-oriented and team-oriented.

The psychometric features of the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire are verified by factor and item analysis. Research and confirmation factor analysis using the main components with Varimax rotation was used. With regard to the reliability of the factors, we can say that it is quite high for the whole scale with 28 statements and four factors - the Kronbach alpha is 0.928. By individual factors, the Kronbach alpha is also quite high (Table 1).

Table 1: Internal consistency of Team Effectiveness Questionnaire

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Shared mental models	10	0,88
Team results	9	0,85
Team process	6	0,82
Commitment	3	0,74

For “Team Performance” (15 items), the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.89 and is also a high value, confirming the good reliability of the scale.

Sample

The study focuses on the IT industry in Bulgaria and in particular, on high tech companies that work on software development. The object of the study is the tech companies. A strict requirement is that in the survey only these types of companies should participate. According to various studies in the IT field and the software industry [19] (e.g. Rönkkö et al., 2010), the participating companies in the present study are defined as belonging to the software business if their activity is in class 62 (Computer programming, consultancy and other related activities) according to the International Standard Industrial Classification (2008) [20]. In this regard, the final sample consists of 494 participants from 35 software companies in Bulgaria.

Results and discussion

High tech companies have their own specifics in terms of team effectiveness. As a result of the descriptive statistics analysis we can state that the team processes ($X = 3,96$) have the highest result from the scale, followed by the team commitment ($X = 3,80$), shared mental models ($X = 3.53$) and team results ($X = 3.38$). The values are shown in Figure 2. We could outline the results of the scale “Team processes” and “Team commitment”. It turns out that for the overall team effectiveness in high tech companies, it is important to have co-operation at work, to discuss issues and to coordinate decisions. Good interaction is important when implementing creative solutions in projects, complex assignments or simple ones. Placing specific tasks, understanding them by each member of the team is also crucial for team performance. It is interesting to note that the participants generally consider themselves able to cope with challenges. Perhaps this contributes to their actual coping with the problems. Given these results, companies can develop team-building programs, improve communication, discuss issues and make team decisions.

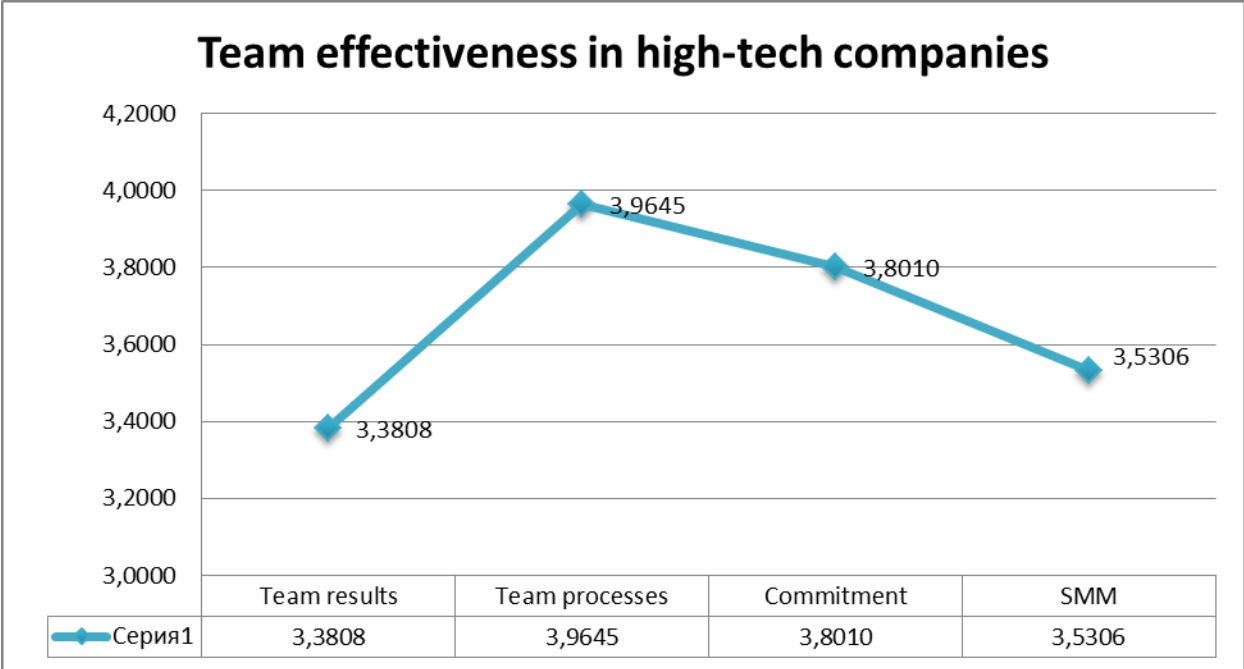


Figure 2: Profile of the team effectiveness in high-tech companies

Team commitment ($X = 3,80$) is ranked second from the participants in the study. As a possible explanation, we can assume that a person's desire to continue working with his/her team on different projects, as well as the pride of belonging to a team, seriously affects the overall functioning of the team.

In the high tech companies it is important to have similar criteria for solving problems related to technologies, tasks and the interrelationship between them. In support of this understanding, the shared mental models are ranked on third place in our sample ($X = 3.53$). A number of authors focus on the importance of the shared mental models for team effectiveness, including [21] Klimoski & Mohammed (1994), [22] Kozlowski and Bell (2013). We could add to these findings, that shared mental models are very important for technology teams as well. In fact, our results are in tune with what has been achieved by other authors researching software companies and demonstrating that shared mental models are a significant factor for team effectiveness. Mental models are included in a research conducted by [23] Moe and Dingsøyr (2008) when studying software teams that use Scrum technology. In the current study, we can confirm that the for the overall teamwork software firms is important how team members assess gaps and errors, if they have similar evaluation mechanisms, and standards to assess task performance. It seems that in order for the teams to work well, a close understanding is needed in two directions - on the one hand for the task and on the other - for the people.

The factor with lowest results for team effectiveness is “Team results”. There is some contradiction with the competitive and market focus of technology companies. Although at organizational level the achievement of goals and the fulfillment of tasks are strongly asserted, for team effectiveness participants in the survey indicate that the achievement of tasks and the completion of projects are not at such importance. It seems that the participants do not have a smooth task distribution among the team members and there is low clarity about their responsibilities. The availability of accurate and timely information also reflects the results and is

likely to be in deficit. Unexpected changes in project scope, changes in team and tasks hamper work and goals achievement. The low score of team processes as a factor for team effectiveness is in contrast to some previous researches in the field, for example the [24]. In the author's studies, team processes are of particular importance for technology organizations where a link between the production and engineering resources of software developers must be maintained to ensure the production of innovative products that are competitive on the market. However, in the present study, it turns out that there is a lack of organizational standards for quality assurance and project results. Possible explanation is that either the companies themselves have not developed such standards, or the employees are unaware of them, or there are simply no such standards because of their technological novelty and / or specificity. In any case, the team results are the weakest factor for team effectiveness compared to the other three factors.

Individual differences in the team effectiveness

Differences between groups according to the type of company exist in team processes and commitment. There are differences between the group of Bulgarian companies with Bulgarian clients and Bulgarian companies with international clients on the one hand, and on the other, between Bulgarian companies with Bulgarian clients and the international companies (Table 2).

Table 2: Differences in team effectiveness according to the type of company

	Type of company	N	M	SD	F	Post hoc Tukey
Team results	BG with BG clients	18	3,1790	0,56802	1,279 (p=0,279)	-
	BG with international clients	282	3,4102	0,66522		
	International with international clients	178	3,3533	0,65677		
Team processes	BG with BG clients	18	3,5833	0,69839	4,203 (p=0,016)	1 – 2 (p=0,015) 1 – 3 (p=0,059)
	BG with international clients	283	4,0077	0,58552		
	International with international clients	180	3,9361	0,67667		
Team commitment	BG with BG clients	17	3,4510	0,6764	7,343 (p=0,001)	2 – 1 (p=0,042) 2 – 3 (p=0,003)
	BG with international clients	282	3,9102	0,74017		
	International with international clients	182	3,6722	0,79399		
Shared mental models	BG with BG clients	18	3,56667	0,44853	0,186 (p=0,830)	-
	BG with international clients	280	3,51393	0,59253		
	International with international clients	177	3,54463	0,60836		

Considering that there are only 18 persons in the group of Bulgarian companies with Bulgarian clients, the data should be interpreted carefully. We can say that the highest values for the Bulgarian software companies that work with clients around the world have the highest result for the interaction within the team. It is possible that the uniting factor for the teams of such companies to be the desire for international proof and the recognition of global customers. In "Team commitment" scale the result is similar - the highest is for the Bulgarian IT companies with international clients. Significant differences are with the group of international organizations and with Bulgarian but with local clients. Again, a possible reason for the desire to work in the same team can be the international visibility of the work, the interesting projects for the team and the diversity. Another explanation would be the presence of people from different cultures in the teams, which would be enriching for the Bulgarian specialists.

Differences according to the nationality

The results of the t-test based on different nationality groups show that foreigners rank higher team results (3,6043) and commitment to the team ($X = 3,9409$). Table 3 presents the results of the Independent samples T-test analysis. Bulgarians are more likely to change teams less inclined to tell their friends that they are proud of their teams and are less likely to want to work with the same team on other projects. They also evaluate how the team works and produces lower than foreigners. It is possible that the Bulgarians in the sample are more critical and therefore have a lower score.

Table 3: Differences in team effectiveness based on the nationality differences of the participants

	Nationality	N	M	SD	t-test	P
Team results	Bulgarian	350	3,3006	0,66891	-4,48	0,000
	Other	123	3,6043	0,58745		
Team processes	Bulgarian	351	3,9354	0,64336	-1,806	0,072
	Other	125	4,0533	0,57797		
Team commitment	Bulgarian	353	3,7583	0,3993	-2,293	0,022
	Other	124	3,9409	0,32514		
Shared mental models	Bulgarian	348	3,5218	0,60862	-0,713	0,48
	Other	123	3,5659	0,52571		

We can confirm on the basis of the results, that the high tech companies should improve the effectiveness mainly for the Bulgarian participants. They need to improve teamwork and commitment. To achieve this the following can be introduced: performance standards, good allocation of tasks, and various teamwork and cohesion programs in the team so that team members are happy with their membership and work in the team.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in today's dynamic conditions, the IT sector is an example of development and technological progress. As a relatively young sector, it has its own specificities, strengths, but also opportunities for improvement. Indisputable is the orientation towards results, innovations, strong entrepreneurial drives, risk appetite, focus on external environment and on customers. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the internal environment - yet it is a sector based

on people's intellect and capacity, and the teams are vital units. In order to optimize people's work, it is valuable to implement certain processes and improve others but without followings strict rules and procedures. Having good processes would only improve the work and stick with the need for rapid responses and changes in order to adapt to changing customer needs. Team commitment is more important for the international compared to the Bulgarian organizations. Knowledge and technology – the demand, creation and transfer among people are among the leading orientations in the sector. A similar way of thinking in the technology companies is created by getting to know and interacting with team members. Different programs for induction and introducing into the team, mentoring programs, informal meetings within the teams can favor the similarities and the interaction. A more in-depth study of organizational factors in high-tech companies will contribute to building our knowledge of them in a dynamic changing business environment.

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