

LEADING THE BORDERLESS TEAM: MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR A HYBRID AND GEOGRAPHICALLY DISPERSED INTERNATIONAL WORKFORCE

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Abstract: The accelerated and permanent shift to hybrid and remote work models has fundamentally altered the operational reality of multinational corporations, giving rise to the "borderless team"—a geographically dispersed, culturally diverse, and digitally connected workforce. This paper explores the unique challenges inherent in leading these teams, including exacerbated communication gaps, a deficit of trust and cohesion, amplified cultural hurdles, and the paradox of performance management at a distance. Through a conceptual analysis of extant literature, the study synthesizes these challenges and proposes a comprehensive framework of management practices designed to foster effectiveness. This framework is structured around four critical domains: (1) Intentional Communication and Technology Stewardship, emphasizing structured rhythms and cloud-based infrastructure; (2) Deliberate Relationship and Trust Building; (3) Inclusive Leadership and Cultural Intelligence to mitigate proximity bias; and (4) Outcome-Oriented Performance Management. The study concludes that success in this new paradigm requires a deliberate evolution from informal, office-centric management to a structured, inclusive, and technology-facilitated leadership approach, redefining the international manager's role from supervisor to connector and strategic facilitator.

Keywords: borderless teams, hybrid work, global workforce management, international leadership, virtual collaboration

1. INTRODUCTION: THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF WORK

The landscape of international management has undergone one of the most significant transformations in decades. While virtual work was often an exception or a perk in the pre-pandemic era, it has now become a standard operating model for many multinational enterprises (MNEs). According to a report by McKinsey Global Institute (2021), remote work has stabilized at levels three to five times higher than before the pandemic, suggesting a permanent structural shift. This has given rise to the "borderless team", a hybrid, geographically dispersed international workforce that operates across time zones, national cultures, and digital platforms, largely unbounded by traditional physical offices. This new reality presents a fundamental challenge to established international management paradigms.

Models built on co-located teamwork, traditional expatriate assignments, and management by physical presence are increasingly obsolete (Neeley, 2015). Managers are now tasked with leading teams they may never meet in person, fostering collaboration across digital interfaces, and maintaining organizational culture in a fragmented environment.

The core problem is that the inherent complexities of international management-cultural differences, communication barriers, and geographic distance, are now amplified by the hybrid work model, creating a new set of managerial challenges that demand novel solutions.

Therefore, this paper aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges in leading hybrid, geographically dispersed international teams?

2. What management practices and frameworks are most effective in fostering collaboration, performance, trust, and inclusion within these borderless teams?

This paper will proceed by first reviewing the relevant literature on virtual and global teams to establish a theoretical foundation. It will then delineate the core challenges of the borderless hybrid team. Subsequently, it will propose a structured framework of effective management practices, supported by theoretical and empirical evidence.

Finally, the discussion will synthesize the implications for international management theory and practice, followed by a conclusion and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM INTERNATIONAL TEAMS TO BORDERLESS NETWORKS

The concept of working across distance is not new. The literature on "virtual teams" has existed for over two decades, defined as "groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task" (Townsend et al., 1998, p. 17).

This research stream identified early challenges, such as building trust without face-to-face interaction (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) and the limitations of communication technologies (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The evolution continued with the study of "global virtual teams" (GVTs), which added the critical dimension of cross-cultural complexity to the mix. Researchers like Gibson et al. (2014) explored how cultural values impact communication styles, conflict resolution, and perceptions of time in dispersed teams.

The work of Shachaf (2008) highlighted that cultural diversity, while a potential source of innovation, can also lead to misunderstandings and process losses if not managed effectively. However, a significant gap remains in the literature. Much of the earlier research on GVTs focused on temporary, project-based teams or scenarios where remote work was a supplement to a primarily co-located model. The current phenomenon of permanent, mainstream, and hybrid borderless teams represents a qualitative shift. The hybrid model, where some members are co-located in an office and others are fully remote, introduces new dynamics like "proximity bias" (Hinds, 2021), which was less prevalent in fully distributed teams.

The current challenge is not just managing distance, but managing a new, complex ecology of work where the lines between physical and digital, and local and global, are permanently blurred. This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesizing existing knowledge and applying it to this new, hybrid context.

3. LEADING BORDERLESS TEAMS: BEYOND TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT

Leading a borderless team is not merely an extension of traditional management practice; it represents a qualitative transformation in how leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and sustained. The competencies that once defined effective leadership in co-located environments, physical visibility, direct supervision, and spontaneous communication, are insufficient in a context defined by dispersion, digital mediation, and temporal asynchronicity. The manager of a borderless team must navigate an intricate web of interconnected challenges that span communication, trust, culture, and performance evaluation. Each of these dimensions interacts dynamically, amplifying or mitigating the others, thereby demanding a holistic and adaptive leadership approach.

3.1. The Coordination and Communication Gap

Perhaps the most immediate and visible challenge in leading borderless teams concerns the coordination and communication gap that emerges when traditional communication channels are disrupted. In conventional, co-located teams, coordination is often facilitated by synchronous

communication, face-to-face meetings, hallway conversations, and spontaneous updates. In contrast, borderless teams depend heavily on asynchronous communication, which, as Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) note, can delay the exchange of information, elongate decision-making cycles, and create temporal fragmentation.

The loss of informal and spontaneous communication, such as the so-called “watercooler” conversations, has profound implications for team dynamics and knowledge sharing. These informal interactions serve as a cornerstone for organizational socialization, fostering a shared understanding of context and culture. When such interactions vanish, teams risk falling into what Gibbs et al. (2021) describe as “contextual fragmentation”, a condition where members operate based on incomplete or inconsistent understandings of goals, norms, and expectations. Moreover, as communication becomes increasingly formalized, scheduled, and mediated by technology, the free flow of ideas that fuels creativity and innovation may be stifled. Without visual cues or informal dialogue, managers also find it more difficult to gauge team sentiment, morale, or engagement, making emotional intelligence and proactive check-ins indispensable leadership practices.

3.2. The Trust and Cohesion Deficit

Trust remains the bedrock of effective teamwork, yet its construction within borderless teams poses distinctive challenges. In co-located settings, trust typically evolves through repeated, informal social interactions, shared lunches, casual exchanges, or collaborative problem-solving moments. In virtual or hybrid environments, however, these opportunities for spontaneous trust formation are limited or absent. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) introduced the notion of “swift trust” to describe the fragile and situational trust that virtual teams must develop rapidly to function effectively. Such trust depends heavily on consistent communication, reliability, and perceived competence, rather than on interpersonal familiarity.

The challenge is further exacerbated by “proximity bias”, defined by Hinds (2021) as the unconscious inclination of leaders to favor employees who are physically closer to them. In hybrid contexts, where some employees work in the office while others remain remote, this bias can lead to the creation of a two-tier organizational system. The “in-group”, those in physical proximity to leadership, may enjoy greater access to informal networks, mentorship, and visibility, while the “out-group” of remote workers experiences isolation, exclusion, or limited career advancement opportunities. This phenomenon undermines both equity and team cohesion, eroding the very trust required for effective collaboration. To counteract this deficit, leaders must practice intentional inclusivity—actively seeking input from remote members, ensuring equal access to information, and modeling equitable communication behaviors.

3.3. The Amplified Cultural and Linguistic Hurdles

While cultural diversity has long been a defining characteristic of international management, the hybrid digital environment introduces new complexities that magnify traditional cross-cultural challenges. Communication in borderless teams is frequently mediated by text-based channels, emails, chat platforms, and collaborative documents, where tone, nuance, and contextual cues are easily lost. As Gibson et al. (2014) observe, communication styles that are direct or indirect may be misinterpreted in such media, leading to misunderstandings and interpersonal tension.

In particular, team members from high-context cultures, who rely on implicit cues and shared situational understanding, may struggle in low-context digital environments that demand explicit articulation of every detail. Conversely, members from low-context cultures may perceive such implicit communication as vague or inefficient. Similarly, differing attitudes toward hierarchy and authority can complicate virtual interactions, where turn-taking and deference norms are harder to interpret. For example, a junior employee from a hierarchical culture may hesitate to speak up during a video call, interpreting silence as respect, whereas colleagues from egalitarian cultures may perceive this as disengagement. The digital medium, far from being neutral, can thus act as an amplifier of

cross-cultural friction, exacerbating misunderstandings that might otherwise be resolved through informal or nonverbal cues in face-to-face settings.

Leaders of borderless teams must therefore develop heightened cultural intelligence (CQ), adapting their communication styles to accommodate diverse cultural expectations and ensuring that digital tools are used inclusively. Training in intercultural competence and the establishment of clear communication norms such as explicit feedback protocols or structured turn-taking in meetings, can help mitigate these challenges.

3.4. The Performance Management Paradox

The final major challenge in leading borderless teams lies in the performance management paradox. Traditional performance evaluation systems, grounded in visible indicators such as “face time,” attendance, or observable effort, become ineffective and inequitable in distributed settings. As Stanciu (2022) notes, managers in borderless environments face the paradoxical task of evaluating the contributions of individuals they rarely see. Without physical visibility, leaders may inadvertently rely on digital presence metrics, such as online activity, message frequency, or hours logged which often reflect “productivity theater” rather than genuine output or impact.

Conversely, in the absence of clear and consistent performance metrics, high-performing remote employees may remain invisible, their contributions undervalued compared to those who are physically present. This inequity not only undermines motivation but can also reinforce proximity bias and cultural misunderstanding. Overcoming this paradox requires a fundamental paradigm shift in managerial mindset from evaluating presence and activity to assessing outcomes and impact. Such a shift demands explicit goal-setting, transparent communication of expectations, and a foundation of mutual trust. Managers must also cultivate data-informed yet empathetic evaluation systems, using both qualitative feedback and quantitative outcomes to assess performance fairly. Moreover, organizational systems, particularly HR policies and reward structures, must be reconfigured to support this outcomes-based logic, ensuring that remote and hybrid employees are recognized equitably for their contributions.

3.5. Integrating the Challenges: Toward a New Leadership Model

The challenges of coordination, trust, culture, and performance do not exist in isolation; rather, they form an interdependent system that defines the lived reality of borderless leadership. Inefficient communication can erode trust; cultural misalignment can distort performance evaluations; and lack of clarity in goals can exacerbate both coordination failures and relational tensions. To lead effectively under these conditions, managers must move beyond reactive problem-solving and embrace a systems-oriented leadership model—one that recognizes the interconnectivity of these dynamics and responds through deliberate, holistic strategies.

Leadership in borderless teams thus requires a blend of technological fluency, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. It demands both strategic design to structure communication and workflow and human-centered empathy, to maintain inclusion and trust across distance. By reframing leadership as the art of building coherence amid dispersion, managers can transform these challenges into opportunities for innovation and inclusivity in global collaboration.

4. A FRAMEWORK OF EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

To navigate these challenges, international managers must adopt a deliberate and structured set of practices. The proposed framework is organized into four key domains.

4.1. Practice Area 1: Intentional Communication and Technology Stewardship

- Structured Communication Rhythms: Implement a cadence of meetings with clear purposes (e.g., daily 15-minute check-ins for alignment, weekly deep-dive syncs, monthly strategic reviews). This creates predictability and ensures regular contact (Munteanu, 2021).

Technology Stack Strategy: Curate a suite of tools for different purposes and ensure team proficiency. For example, use Slack/Teams for quick, asynchronous questions, Asana/Trello for project tracking, and Zoom for relationship-building meetings. The foundational infrastructure for these digital tools, often reliant on cloud computing, is critical, as it provides the scalable and accessible platform that makes borderless collaboration technically feasible (Dzitac et al., 2017). A key principle is to match the richness of the communication technology to the complexity of the task at hand.

Asynchronous-First Mindset: Encourage a culture where work does not require an immediate, real-time response. This empowers team members in different time zones and promotes deep work. This involves creating detailed documentation, using video updates, and leveraging collaborative documents.

4.2. Practice Area 2: Deliberate Relationship and Trust Building

Trust must be engineered, not left to chance.

- **Structured Social Interaction:** Schedule virtual coffee chats, online team-building games, and dedicated "virtual watercooler" channels. These interactions must be facilitated and not optional to ensure inclusion of all members, regardless of location.
- **Purposeful Onboarding and Offsites:** Invest significantly in the initial onboarding of remote members to integrate them into the culture. Furthermore, periodic face-to-face offsites, even if infrequent, are critical investments for building the foundational social capital and trust that sustains the team during long periods of virtual work (Neeley, 2015).
- **Creating Psychological Safety:** Leaders must actively model vulnerability, admit mistakes, and create forums where all team members feel safe to express ideas and concerns without fear of reprisal (Edmondson, 2018). This is especially crucial for members from cultures that are less assertive.

4.3. Practice Area 3: Inclusive Leadership and Cultural Intelligence

The manager's role shifts from a central commander to a facilitator of inclusion.

- **Mitigating Proximity Bias:** Managers must take conscious steps to ensure equity. This includes rotating meeting times to share the burden of odd hours, establishing rules that remote participants speak first, and mandating camera-on or camera-off flexibility to avoid singling out individuals (Hinds, 2021).
- **Explicit Cultural Norm-Setting:** Instead of assuming shared norms, the team should co-create "team working agreements." These explicit documents outline expectations for communication (response times, preferred channels), decision-making, and feedback, taking into account the diverse cultural backgrounds of team members (Meyer, 2014).
- **Leader as Connector:** The manager actively works to create direct connections between team members, reducing their role as a central hub and information bottleneck. This fosters a stronger, more resilient network within the team.

4.4. Practice Area 4: Outcome-Oriented Performance Management

Success must be defined by output, not input.

- **Clear Goals and Metrics:** Implement goal-setting frameworks like Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) to provide absolute clarity on what needs to be achieved and how success will be measured (Doran, 1981). This provides autonomy and empowers team members to manage their own work processes.
- **Regular, Forward-Looking Feedback:** Replace the annual performance review with a continuous process of coaching and development. Regular one-on-one conversations should focus on removing obstacles, providing resources, and discussing career growth, rather than solely on past performance (Stanciu, 2022).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The emergence of the borderless team represents not merely a change in organizational design but a profound paradigm shift in the theory and practice of international management. As globalization and digitalization converge, the boundaries that once defined traditional work structures are dissolving. Technological advancement, the normalization of remote collaboration, and the growing emphasis on flexibility have collectively given rise to teams that exist and operate beyond geography. These teams function across borders, time zones, and cultures, relying on virtual platforms and asynchronous communication to achieve common goals. This transformation calls for a fundamental rethinking of how organizations coordinate, lead, and sustain performance in transnational environments.

In this context, the paper argues that the traditional managerial toolkit developed in an era when co-location and physical presence were the norm is increasingly inadequate for addressing the realities of the hybrid and fully virtual workplace. Classical leadership models tend to rely on visibility, proximity, and informal interaction as mechanisms for trust-building and control. However, in a world where collaboration occurs primarily through screens and digital interfaces, these assumptions no longer hold. The managerial role must, therefore, evolve from supervision to digital facilitation, from command to connection, and from control to coordination across dispersed and diverse networks.

The framework proposed in this study seeks to address these emerging challenges by synthesizing established theories of global leadership, cross-cultural management, and virtual team dynamics, and applying them to the novel context of permanent hybrid work. It proposes a structured approach for leading borderless teams that emphasizes intentionality, empathy, and inclusivity in digital interactions. The framework highlights the need for leaders to design communication patterns, foster psychological safety in virtual settings, and maintain team cohesion without relying on physical presence. In this sense, leadership in borderless teams becomes both more deliberate and more human-centered, as it must compensate for the absence of traditional social cues and spontaneous interaction.

The theoretical implications of this paradigm shift are considerable. Established models of global team effectiveness, such as those emphasizing cultural diversity, task interdependence, and shared identity, must now be revised to incorporate the hybrid dimension explicitly. Hybrid work introduces unique biases, such as proximity bias (favoring employees who are physically closer) and visibility bias (rewarding those more active online), that can distort performance evaluation and inclusion. Moreover, the very competencies of international managers must be reconceptualized. While cross-cultural sensitivity remains central, new competencies, digital literacy, virtual empathy, inclusive facilitation, and cultural intelligence in online contexts, become critical to sustaining trust and engagement in teams that never meet in person.

From a practical standpoint, the implications for organizations are equally far-reaching. Businesses must invest in developing leaders who can effectively navigate this new reality. Training programs should focus on strengthening communication skills in virtual environments, understanding intercultural nuances in digital interaction, and cultivating the ability to motivate and evaluate employees based on outcomes rather than presence. Furthermore, organizational systems and processes, including performance appraisal, promotion criteria, and talent management, must be redesigned to be location-agnostic and outcome-driven. Such adjustments ensure that fairness and inclusion are maintained even when employees operate from different regions or time zones.

Finally, the ability to build organizational culture, trust, and high performance in borderless teams will determine which organizations thrive in the future. Success in this environment depends on the capacity to foster belonging, align shared purpose, and maintain cohesion without the traditional anchors of physical proximity. The borderless team thus becomes a symbol of both the opportunities and challenges of global management in the twenty-first century. Those organizations that master the art of leading without borders, balancing technological efficiency with human connection, will define the next era of international management practice.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The transition to borderless teams is increasingly recognized as a defining feature of contemporary international business. The traditional concept of teams as geographically bounded units has given way to a new organizational reality in which collaboration transcends spatial and temporal limitations. This transformation has been accelerated by advances in digital communication technologies, the normalization of hybrid work structures, and the strategic pursuit of global talent. The borderless team therefore represents both a response to and a driver of globalization, reflecting how technology and culture interact to redefine the nature of work and management.

At a structural level, borderless teams challenge many of the long-standing assumptions embedded in international management theory. Historically, global teams operated within clear geographic and cultural boundaries, and physical co-location was viewed as essential for cohesion, creativity, and trust. In contrast, borderless teams operate across multiple time zones and digital platforms, relying on asynchronous communication and virtual interaction as the foundation of coordination. This change compels managers and scholars alike to reconsider the very notion of presence, leadership, and collaboration in the international business environment.

Despite their potential advantages, such as enhanced flexibility, access to global expertise, and reduced operational costs, borderless teams also present a series of complex challenges. Chief among these are communication gaps, which arise when team members interpret messages differently due to linguistic, cultural, or technological barriers. The absence of nonverbal cues and spontaneous dialogue can lead to misinterpretation and disengagement. In addition, trust deficits often emerge in virtual environments where personal interaction is limited. Without deliberate effort, employees may perceive unequal access to information or opportunities, undermining psychological safety and team cohesion. Finally, the amplification of cultural hurdles, stemming from diverse communication styles, attitudes toward hierarchy, and varying expectations of time, can further complicate collaboration if not carefully managed.

Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate and theoretically grounded approach to leadership. The paper therefore proposes a comprehensive framework of management practices tailored to the borderless context. The first component, intentional communication, emphasizes structured dialogue, transparency, and empathy to ensure mutual understanding across digital platforms. The second, deliberate trust-building, involves consistent feedback, recognition of contributions, and equitable participation in decision-making. The third, inclusive leadership, calls for leaders to foster psychological safety and cultural awareness, creating a space where diverse perspectives are valued. The final element, outcome-oriented performance management, redefines productivity metrics by focusing on results rather than presence or visibility. Collectively, these principles provide a roadmap for leading distributed teams with clarity, fairness, and purpose.

The effectiveness of such a framework, however, depends on a broader organizational commitment to systemic change. It is insufficient for individual managers to adapt in isolation; organizations must embed the principles of borderless collaboration into their structures, policies, and reward systems. This entails redesigning human resource management (HRM) practices to ensure they are location-agnostic, equitable, and aligned with outcome-based evaluation. Performance appraisal systems, promotion criteria, and professional development programs must be recalibrated to account for the realities of hybrid and remote work. Additionally, organizations must invest in technological infrastructure that supports transparent communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing across geographical divides.

From a scholarly perspective, the transition to borderless teams opens a wide range of research opportunities. Future studies should seek to empirically test the proposed management framework through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Large-scale surveys could examine correlations between leadership practices and performance outcomes in multinational enterprises (MNEs), while ethnographic and case-based approaches could provide nuanced insights into the lived experiences of managers and employees within borderless environments. Comparative analyses across

industries, regions, and organizational sizes would further illuminate how contextual factors mediate the success of borderless collaboration.

Beyond short-term outcomes, longitudinal research is essential to understanding the long-term consequences of hybrid and borderless work. Questions remain regarding the impact of sustained virtual collaboration on innovation, employee well-being, identity formation, and career progression. Remote workers may face challenges in gaining visibility, building informal networks, and accessing mentorship opportunities, which can in turn affect promotion and retention rates. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing inclusive and sustainable global organizations that balance flexibility with equity.

An emerging area of inquiry concerns the intersection between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and borderless teamwork. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into digital work platforms, it has the potential to transform the way teams communicate, coordinate, and make decisions. AI-powered tools can facilitate cross-cultural communication through real-time translation and sentiment analysis, provide data-driven insights into team health, and mitigate human biases by offering objective assessments of contribution and engagement. However, the reliance on algorithmic systems also raises new ethical and managerial questions concerning privacy, transparency, and the risk of over-automation. Future research should thus explore how AI can be harnessed not only as a technological enabler but also as a catalyst for inclusive and equitable global collaboration.

Ultimately, the transition to borderless teams underscores the need for an ongoing rethinking of leadership and organizational design in international business. The future of work will be defined not by physical presence but by the ability to connect, communicate, and collaborate effectively across distance and difference. As organizations continue to navigate this evolving landscape, success will belong to those that master the art of cultivating trust, culture, and shared purpose in a world without borders. This transformation calls for a synthesis of technological capability and human-centered leadership, an approach that integrates efficiency with empathy, structure with flexibility, and global reach with local understanding.

In conclusion, the study of borderless teams invites scholars and practitioners to engage in a deeper dialogue about the meaning of leadership in the digital age. The challenges are significant, but so too are the opportunities for innovation, inclusion, and sustainable growth. As technology continues to blur the boundaries of work, the true test of international management will lie in its capacity to build cohesive, high-performing, and culturally intelligent teams that thrive beyond geography.

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