6 General Conclusions

This chapter concludes the study of multinational teams in the European Commission and the European Parliament. The first section develops practical advice for organizations and team members, based on the results of this study. The second part of this chapter gives recommendations for future research.

6.1. Managerial Implications

This study emphasizes the complexity of multinational teams. In this chapter, according to the findings of the empirical part of the study, managerial implications for successful multinational teams in the European Commission and the European Parliament will be discussed.

Members and leaders of multinational teams (i.e. in this study employees in the European Commission and politicians in the European Parliament) have to be aware that diversity within teams is not automatically an asset. It enhances the complexity of team work. Therefore, efficient problem solutions within such teams can only be found when being aware of the complexity inherent in multinational teams. A model of the type presented in figure 9 allows for understanding the real complexity of multinational teams. An effective consideration of all categories (and their interrelations) results in team performance. However, disregarding one of the categories (i.e. society, organization, individual, team and moderators) might result in worse performance and might – in the worst case – lead to a non-achievement of the desired objectives. Thus, making managerial efforts to solve problems in one category is highly influenced by the other categories (see Appendix C for an overview of the complex relations of the relevant categories in the European Commission).

With the conclusions of the empirical part of the study in mind, specific actions will now be discussed which the author believes will help team members/leaders in the European Commission and the European Parliament to work in / manage multinational teams more efficiently. According to the identified categories the managerial implications are organized as follows:

- **How to manage cultural differences?**
- **How to manage ‘efficient’ multinational team norms?**
  - What are ‘efficient’ multinational team norms?
  - What role does the team implementation process play?
  - What role does the team development process play?
- **How to manage the “individual category” and what role does the organizational context play?**
How to manage cultural differences?

According to the findings in the European Commission and the European Parliament working successfully in multinational teams implies being aware of the culturally determined norms of behavior (CDNB), which all team members bring into the team. As seen in both institutions (where individuals from 25 different cultures work together) the influence of CDNB on the team performance is strongly linked to the numbers of cultures within a team. If there are only two or three cultures within a team, team members and team leaders really have to worry about cultural standards. A kind of power-game might emerge about what norms of behavior (e.g. working, communication, and discussion styles) will be established in the team. It can be assumed that the larger the team and the more culturally different the members in the team are, the more easily the importance of bilateral conflicts might be reduced. Consequently, the larger the number of cultures the less conflict might occur due to culturally determined norms of behavior. This is an important benefit of multinational teams compared to bi- or tricultural teams, as the importance of single clashes becomes small enough to give room for adopting new reciprocal multinational team norms that serve the interest of all team members. The empirical findings in the European Parliament emphasize the existence of multinational team norms in order to overcome the influences that differences in e.g. the individual category might have on team performance. Team leaders have to analyze and support the analysis of differences and similarities in CDNB. They should present them to the team members by some kind of mirror images, i.e. how do I see the other team members, and how do they see me. This is the basis for the development of a common strategy, e.g. a mutual consent about the norms of behavior within the team.

In the empirical analysis it becomes obvious that the efficient management of cultural differences is strongly related to the establishment and development of efficient multinational team norms.

How to manage ‘efficient’ multinational team norms?

- What are ‘efficient’ multinational team norms?

Efficient team norms support team performance. The establishment of team norms does not automatically imply that these team norms are goal oriented, i.e. serving the task achievement. Team leaders and team members have to be aware that a mix of relation-oriented (e.g. mutual considerateness) and performance oriented norms (e.g. informal rules, facilitation of communication, culture of compromise) is needed for efficient multinational team performance. In order to establish ‘efficient’ multinational team norms, a clear definition of the role of each team member is necessary. In the European Commission, individuals who know what their task is perform better than those without a clear responsibility assignment. Additionally, the overall goal the team needs to achieve has to be defined.
Being aware of what are efficient team norms is the first step towards a more efficient team performance, taking the right action in order to establish such team norms is the next step.

The establishment of 'efficient' multinational team norms and the team implementation process

Since it is known that wrong perceptions could have a detrimental impact on future team performance, it is suggested to team leaders/members that they should be aware of the perceptions within their team. This influences the way of how team members cooperate and how much effort they invest to achieve the goals of the team. In their studies, Ely & Thomas (2001) and Richard et al. (2003) underline the importance that team members perceive differences as a valuable source. To maximize the chances of successful multinational team work, team leaders should use the team implementation process to provide team members with relevant information about each other so that ‘bad feelings’ and ‘bad’ stereotypes cannot emerge and not negatively influence the team process. When with the team implementation process team members get information (context specific stereotypes) that override their prevailing general stereotypes, then there is an improved chance of success. Team implementation therefore has to provide new knowledge, which can be easily grasped and enlarges the available repertoire of modes of behavior of all individual team members. This has a positive impact on the level of satisfaction of individuals and, finally, contributes to team success.

How to manage the team implementation process to support the development of 'efficient' multinational team norms?

With team implementation a ‘qualification profile’ of each team member should be made available to all team members and it should be explained why this mix of personalities, qualifications and nationalities would contribute to team success. In the European Commission and the European Parliament individuals from 25 cultural backgrounds work together. Consequently, various settings of cultural combinations are possible within a team. Therefore, the ‘qualification profile’ should include as a starting point the cultural values inherent to the national backgrounds of team members as a kind of cultural distance-map. Team members have to be made aware that “the map is not the territory, it is simply a picture of the territory” (Brannen et al., 2004: 29). Team members should discuss their perceptions of the national culture they belong to and position themselves in relation to the information provided about their national cultural values. The next step to establish efficient multinational team norms is to go beyond cultural values. It is recommended that team leaders give team members room to discuss and explain to each other (a) what are their perceptions of each others cultures and (b) what are their specific approaches to work styles: communication, negotiation, decision making, progress monitoring, and conflict resolutions.
This process aims to prepare for the establishment of efficient multinational team norms. It should be supported by the use of established intercultural trainings to figure out what perceptions and what kind of CDNBs are important for each team member individually and therefore should be expressed at the beginning of the team formation process.

- How to manage the team development process to support the development of ‘efficient’ multinational team norms?

Team members/leaders who are conscious of team norms which in similar contexts proved successful in the past, and understand the process of how new multinational team norms emerge, can positively influence the development of team norms and thereby contribute to the success of teams. Experienced team members who are aware of the particular needs of multinational teams can be helpful to transfer previously applied team norms, which proved successful, to other teams.

Providing teams with the opportunities to interact does not automatically lead to the elimination of possible negative effects of multinationality (cf. for a multicultural context: Ravlin et al., 2000: 40). To deal with these issues, teams need process-related feedback to unleash learning processes for the improvement of team interactions over time (Thomas, 1999). Therefore, it is of importance that this process is monitored and moderated by team leaders or by external consultants.

How to manage the ‘individual category’ and what role does the ‘organizational context’ play?

The establishment of efficient team norms is highly influenced by the individual team member and the organization in which the team is implemented. It can be assumed that the team norms established in a bureaucratic administration or a political environment might not be the most suitable for multinational teams in e.g. a private company.

Although team members’ behavior is influenced by general cultural values of the society in which they were socialized, they are all individuals. Individuals are characterized by so-called ‘non-visible characteristics’, i.e. personality traits, personal interests and perceptions. Personal interests (like e.g. in the European Commission the individual stage of career development) influence the decision of being a single- or a team-player. However, this behavior can be affected by the organization itself. It is of particular importance that organizations offer structures which foster the existence of teams: The use of e.g. a reward system which is more individual than team oriented will have negative effects on the establishment of efficient team norms as seen in the European Commission.

It is not easy to become aware of the non-visible characteristics of team members. State of the art personality tests (like e.g. the Global Personality Inventory Test) help to figure out the personality characteristics within teams. The optimal
degree of diversity in personality traits has to be defined depending on the task a team has to fulfill. It has to be decided if a mix of personalities or an overlap of personalities within the team enables more efficient performance. Additionally, the existence of strong team norms helps to deal with the issues inherent in the differences of the non-visible characteristics of team members as seen in the European Parliament.

Summary

According to the complexity of multinational teams it is not possible to offer a nostrum for efficient multinational team work in the European Commission and the European Parliament. However, it can be recommended that individuals who have already experienced this complexity should be appointed “knowledge managers” in multinational teams. Experienced team members have the ability to understand implicit informal rules and norms in multinational teams. They support the efficient use of diverse (culturally based) knowledge of other team members. Last but not least they further and encourage the establishment of efficient team norms. Therefore, at least one multinational-team expert should be within the team in order to achieve the tasks.

Multinational team experts might use the complexity model of multinational team work to explain the complex relations between the five categories of influence (society, organization, individual, team and moderators) to the other team members. The aim of this model is not to terrify multinational teams about the complexity they have to handle, but to provide a kind of check-list supporting the analysis of strengths and weaknesses of multinational teams to foster their performance. Team members/leaders who bear in mind that taking managerial action in one category will always influence the other categories are able to undertake a straightforward analysis of opportunities and challenges within multinational teams.

6.2. Implications for future research

The aim of this study was to analyse the complexity of multinational teams in a public-organization context. This setting was chosen as only a few researchers (e.g. Elron et al., 2003) have analyzed teams in a non-profit context so far. Additionally, the European Commission and the European Parliament are research settings where (at least now) almost all of the European nationalities are working together in one organization.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study and the research process:

- One has to be aware of the needed interdisciplinary research approach when studying multinational team performance. Although e.g. sociology and psychology present different theoretical levels of analysis, the study shows
that both of them are related and that their relation is essential to explain the research topic.

- In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative data allows for the analysis of social processes. This was crucial for the success of this study as the influential categories on team performance appear in team processes.

Like in any research project, time and manpower limited the results of this study. Consequently, data collection was limited to Austrian team members. This was also caused by methodological issues: In recent research, it was shown that interviewers who are from the same culture than the interview partners achieve better results than interviewers who are from a different culture than the interview partner (Fink et al., 2004a: 12).

Reproducing this study with team members from other countries of the European Union may allow for the refinement of the model. It is assumed that team members from other cultures might emphasize other sub-categories within the main categories of the model than the Austrian interview partners did.

The complexity of the model allows for the presentation of the interdependency of the main categories. Case studies and longitudinal studies might help to understand in more detail the underlying relations between the sub-categories of the model and the inherent processes. It has to be pointed out that results can only present a static view of influencing categories on multinational team performance. With the enlargement of the European Union team members from diverse cultures will join the teams in the European Commission and the European Parliament. This might influence e.g. culturally determined norms of behaviour within the teams.

According to the findings of this study it seems to be interesting for follow-up research to elaborate among other things the following selected research aspects:

- What are the most influential categories of multinational team performance in various organizations (e.g. profit- versus non profit organizations)?
- What role do culturally determined norms of behaviour play in multinational teams?
- How do team members perceive the organizational culture? Is there a gap between the perceived organizational culture and the explicitly defined organizational culture?
- What role does organizational structure, e.g. performance appraisal system, play in multinational teams?
- What kinds of team norms are established? Are there differences in the establishment of team norms according to the organizational context (e.g. profit- versus non-profit organizations)?
- How do teams establish team norms? Are they explicitly defined?
- Do teams whose team learning process is supervised establish more efficient team norms than those whose learning process is not supervised? Does
the desired and actually needed degree of supervision on part of the team members depend on their personality and personal interest and their cultural background? If yes, which individual and cultural characteristics need supervision (or do not need it)?

- What can be learnt from the complexity of multinational teams for other fields of international management (i.e. post-merger-integration phase – comparison with team process phases)?

Being aware of its limitations, it is the aim of this study to contribute to the area of multinational team research. It encourages future investigations in this field of research by exploring the complexity and by showing the relations of five categories of influence on multinational team performance: society, organization, individual, team and moderators.