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EXPLORING INCLUSION IN THE REMOTE STARTUP LANDSCAPE: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Maj, J., Hamza-Orlinska, A.

Jolanta Maj / Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Management, Department of Management Systems and Organizational Development, wyb. Wyspianskiego 27, 50-370 Wroclaw, Poland. Email: jolanta.maj@pwr.edu.pl (corresponding author)

Aneta Hamza-Orlinska / Department of HR & Organization, EM Normandie Business School, Métis lab, 22-24 Foley St, Mountjoy, Dublin, D01 W2T2, Ireland. Email: ahamza-orlinska@em-normandie.fr

Abstract

The focus of the paper and the main objective of the research is to scrutinize the adaptability of an inclusion model tailored for conventional workspaces to the context of startups employing remote freelance teams across different locations, probing whether this model holds relevance in more flexible work arrangements. The paper is based on a qualitative analysis of empirical material collected in a case study. The case study was conducted in a virtual marketing startup registered in Ireland composed of 14 employees, including 12 freelancers and 2 full-time employees working remotely from the UK, Ireland, France, Croatia, Romania, Belgium and Ukraine. We found that the degree of organizational inclusion is determined by employee empowerment orientation. The study shows the positive effect of inclusion practices and processes on perceived inclusion, talent retention and inclusive climate as well as organizational and individual performance. The paper contributes to the ongoing scientific debate by presenting how an inclusive workplace might be achieved in a geographically distributed, virtual startup organization. Furthermore, as Central European startups aim to expand globally, our insights into inclusion in geographically dispersed teams can be especially relevant. It provides guidance on how to maintain an inclusive culture when working with remote teams across different countries.

Implications for Central European audience: In the Central European business landscape, especially in geographically dispersed startups, adapting inclusion models to virtual settings is essential. Given the region's diverse cultures and historical contexts, understanding communication dynamics and fostering authenticity and psychological safety are crucial. Prioritizing these aspects aligns with Central European values of collaboration and innovation, enhancing employee well-being and positioning businesses for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Inclusion; inclusive organization; startup; virtual organization; diversity; geographically distributed teams

JEL Classification: M14, M13

Introduction

New ways of working such as freelance, temporary contracts and self-employment currently represent 10.1% of the US workforce and are likely to grow in the coming years (Scully-Russ and Torraco, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to turn to remote, digitally mediated modes of work and showed the need for further transformation in this direction (Branicki, 2020). A virtual work environment and increasing online communication further lead to new ways of recruitment, organizing work (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021; Scully-Russ and Torraco, 2020), employment relationship building and work independence (Raghuram et al., 2001), enhanced job satisfaction, work-life balance (Qiu and Dauth, 2022) and well-being (Zacher and Rudolph, 2021). In response to the potential significance of the shifts in the nature and structure of work, scholars have turned their attention to the impact of diversity and inclusion on the future of work (Alkan et al., 2022; Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021; Combs et al., 2019).

We focus on the model of inclusion through the lens of creating an inclusive workplace (Shore et al., 2018) to explore whether the model that was initially designed for traditional, mature, physical organizational settings can be adapted for startup organizations that hire mainly remote freelance workers in geographically dispersed teams. To the best our knowledge, organizational-level inclusion in startup organizations has not been addressed in the inclusion literature. The model of the inclusive workplace (Shore et al., 2018) has been selected for this paper for two main reasons. Firstly, it brings together different components of the inclusion climate highlighted in the mainstream literature (Mor Barak and Cherin, 1998; Ferdman, 2010; Gasorek, 2000; Pless and Maak, 2004; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006; Roberson, 2006). Secondly, although Shore et al. (2018) focused on the US context, it is argued that the model should be tested in other nations and organizational contexts. It is argued that "such work is needed to advance inclusionary goals for organizations and to enhance experiences of inclusion among employees" (Shore et al., 2018), which is one of the objectives of this paper.

1 Theoretical Background

1.1 Inclusion and inclusive workplace

Following Ferdman's (2014) literature review on inclusion, Shore et al. (2018) married two major research approaches to inclusion: empowerment and anticipation of the exclusionary practices in the workplace with regard to two levels of analysis: the mezzo perspective of compliance practices and the micro employee perspective of inclusion. This multilayer perspective has been considered by diversity management scholars (Syed and Özbilgin, 2019) and confirms the assumption that the creation of an inclusive climate and employee experiences must be underpinned by the "enactment" (Shore et al., 2018) of management and practices. Figure 1 is a visualization of the model of an inclusive workplace by Shore et al. (2018) that is discussed in the following sections.

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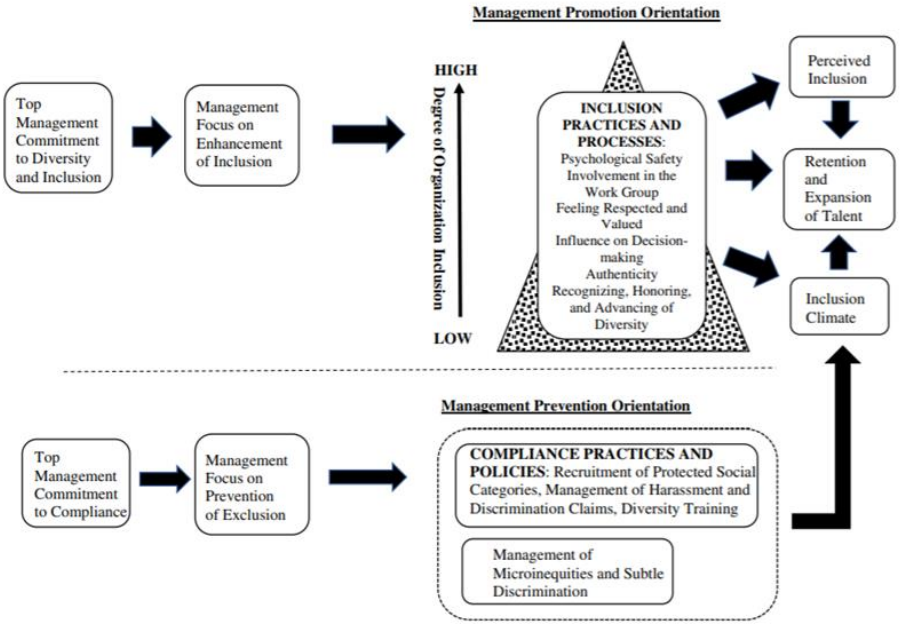
Figure 1 | Inclusive organization model



Source: Shore et al. (2018)

The model of an inclusive workplace (Shore et al., 2018) comprises five dimensions: psychological safety associated with sharing different opinions, involvement in the workgroup, feeling respected and valued, influence on decision making and authenticity. Psychological safety is related to interpersonal trust (Nishii, 2013) among all members of an organization and externally, for example when dealing with customers. Involvement in the workgroup (Ferdman & Davidson, 2002; Nishii and Rich, 2013; Pless and Maak, 2004) is also important, as employees need access to information and resources to be able to fully participate in decision making and contribute to the organization's goals. The third dimension is referred to as “feeling respected and valued”. Cho and Mor Barak (2008) explained that the sense of feeling appreciated may be seen as an indirect consequence of group and individual excellence at work while pointing out the importance of human resource practices. The fourth dimension of the model is “influence on decision making” (Mor Barak et al., 2016; Pelled et al., 1999; Sabharwal, 2014) which consists of providing employees with decision-making power about organizations or their jobs (Sabharwal, 2014) corresponding to the idea of “equal decision making” (Nishii and Rich, 2013) and inclusive leadership (Shore & Chung, 2022). The fifth category is the one of “authenticity” (Shore et al., 2018), which is the ability to express one's identity freely without fear of exclusion. Finally, at the mezzo level (Shore et al., 2018), an inclusive workplace also involves the recognition, honour and advancement of diversity, as well as equal opportunities for mobility, promotion, compensation and benefits for all employees.

1.2 Geographical dispersion and inclusion

Geographically dispersed teams, also identified as virtual teams, are defined as consisting of individuals working on independent tasks from multiple locations, relying on computer-mediated communication (Polzer et al., 2006). Research into virtual work points to both positive and negative effects. Some evidence suggests that it may increase productivity and satisfaction (Bloom et al., 2015). Virtual teams are believed to be better and quicker at decision making (Majchrzak et al., 2004), have greater availability of knowledge resources (Paul, 2006) and be more effective in decision making (Schmidt et al., 2001). Additionally, when virtual teams included a diverse group of members, they were found to perform better (Staples and Zhao, 2006). Therefore, virtuality and diversity may lead to better competitive advantage (Majchrzak et al., 2004), especially considering that inclusive virtual organizations and teams may combine the benefits of a diverse workforce with the flexible benefits resulting from advanced technological solutions (Hung et al., 2021). Communication failure or misunderstandings may be prevented by virtual teams during knowledge sharing (Alsharo et al., 2017). However, it should be noted that, as Gilson et al. (2015) suggested, employees may have difficulties acclimatizing to working in a virtual organization. Challenges in establishing and maintaining clear communication have been emphasized (Nyberg et al., 2021) as well as challenges in establishing a preferred organizational culture and introducing newcomers into the organizational culture (Verburg et al., 2013). Other processes such as monitoring and motivation become problematic in virtual settings (Gilson et al., 2015). Among other challenges of virtual work pointed out by scholars are difficulties with onboarding processes (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013) and decreasing identification with the organization (Zhu et al., 2017). There are also indicators that virtual work has a negative impact on job performance (Golden et al., 2008), collaboration (Jarvenpaa and Välikangas, 2020) and well-being (Charalampous et al., 2019). It is especially important to take difficulties in communication and collaboration with geographically dispersed teams into account when fostering an inclusive work environment and embracing diversity (Cramton and Webber, 2005). A number of scholars have established that virtual teams, particularly multinational ones, excel at diversity and inclusion accounting for many diversity dimensions such as nationality, ethnic origin, gender, etc. (Hung et al., 2021; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Research into virtual teams includes several propositions for methods aimed at improving management in such organizations (Herz & Rauschnabel, 2019) or focus on different aspects of managing a virtual organization such as leadership (Kearney & Gebert, 2009), trust (Breuer et al., 2016; Breuer et al., 2020) or team processes (Kurmann et al., 2014). One of the few studies focusing on inclusion in global virtual teams is the research conducted by Hung et al. (2021) with a focus on non-spatial proximity and knowledge sharing. However, the question of how inclusion should be implemented and managed and what its focus should be in geographically dispersed organizations remains unanswered.

2 Research Design and Methodology

The paper is based on an analysis of empirical material collected in a qualitative study and adopted deductive reasoning. The case study was conducted in a virtual marketing startup registered in Ireland composed of 14 employees, including 12 freelancers and 2 full-time employees working remotely from the UK, Ireland, France, Croatia, Romania, Belgium and Ukraine. Figure 2 presents the organizational structure of the startup.

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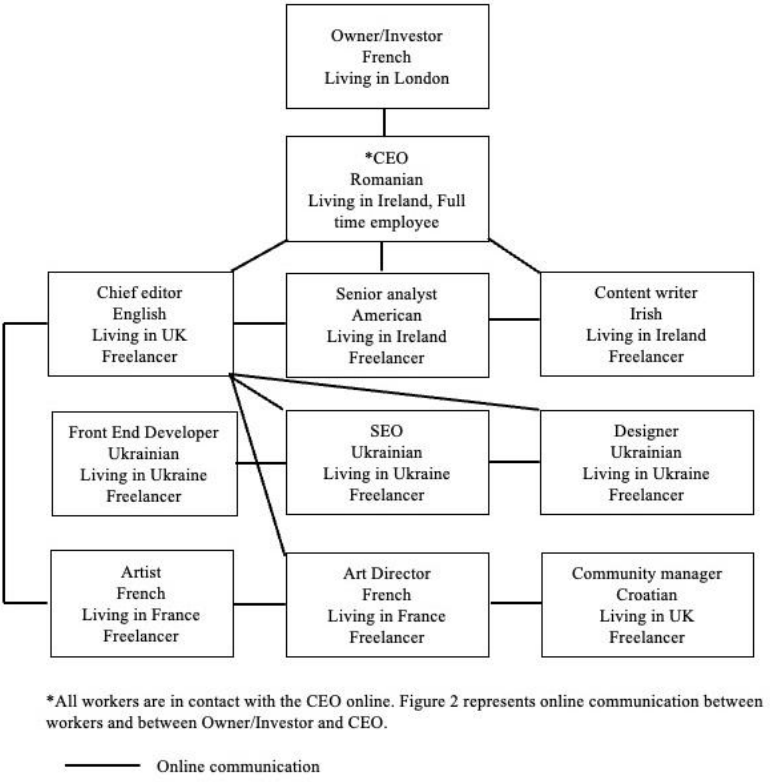
Figure 2 | Organizational structure



Source: Own elaboration

2.1 Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with four employees, including one full-time employee at the management level and three freelance workers. In addition, we conducted observations of 15 team meetings online via Teams. Three interviews were conducted in English. One interview was in French and translated into English via Google Hangouts. All the interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. In all the cases, permission to record the interview was obtained. The case study deployed a second method: online observations, conducted on a weekly basis at a 5-week interval and led to a total of 15 hours of passive observations of meetings. The observations allowed a greater understanding of the inclusive climate. Notes from the observations were coded using MAXQDA. This technique included observation notes on meeting topics, interactions, team building, reflection memos and theoretical memos (possible links with the theoretical model of inclusion). Finally, researchers consulted the minutes from the online team meetings and the information on the company's website. The characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 | Interviewee characteristics

Interviewee code	Role	Employment	Nationality	Age
I1	CEO	Full-time	Romanian	41
I2	Senior analyst	Freelancer	American	23
I3	Chief editor	Freelancer	British	64
I4	Art director	Freelancer	French	45
I5	Founder/CEO	Full-time	French	35

Source: Own elaboration

2.2 Data analysis

After conducting an intelligent transcription, the quality of the transcription was verified by the authors. The interviews were analysed using MAXQDA software. A combination of deductive and inductive coding was used. The first round of coding was made using predefined codes, which were categories from the model of Shore et al. (2018). When reviewing the model of the inclusive workplace, we built a questionnaire focused on the key dimensions of the model around the perception of inclusion, practices and processes, inclusive climate, inclusive leadership and workgroup inclusion (Shore et al., 2018) with one question related respectively to each dimension of the model. We analysed the data using open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We used theoretical memos to highlight the emerging dimensions of inclusion (Phase 1) using MAXQDA and open and thematic coding. This stage was iterative as we switched between analysing data from the interviews and examining the theoretical model. We regarded the theoretical saturation as sufficient when we came upon frequent repetitions of codes and therefore stopped coding and generating new information.

3 Research Results

3.1 Commitment of self-organized teams/organizations to diversity and inclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, no management prevention orientation associated with top management commitment to compliance and focus on prevention through practices and policies was identified in the case study. Through a greater focus on management promotion orientation described in the model, the managers focus on empowerment of self-organizing and self-managing teams that are seen as highly autonomous, equal and diverse in terms of skills rather than protected social categories. Instead of recruitment of protected dimensions of diversity, the key focus is on recruitment of specific skills that are critical for the completion of self-sustained work and fostering organizational growth.

3.2 Psychological safety

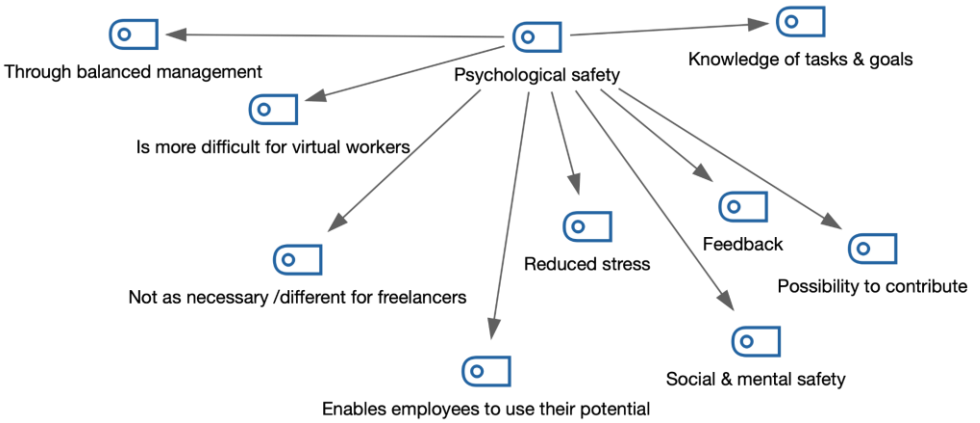
The analysis showed that “feeling safe” for self-organizing teams means physical, social and mental safety allowing not only identity groups but all employees to express their unique views without fear. Also, under the term “psychological safety”, we summarized employee

empowerment to foster creativity, greater individual performance, ability to contribute to projects at the individual level and clarity of tasks and goals, which appears to be an essential element of inclusion for the self-organizing teams. For example, Interviewee 1 (CEO), when talking about inclusion, explained: “For us it’s more about how to make employees feel safe, welcome and be able to deliver their work and come up with ideas that could differentiate us. To make them shine in the way they can produce better things.” On the one hand, such psychological safety can be more challenging for self-organizing teams working remotely because of the lack of day-to-day interactions with other employees, leading to feelings of “insecurity” and “not feeling close to the heart of the organization” Interviewee 3, Chief Editor).

On the other hand, the practice of remote freelancing offers the opportunity to easily switch jobs and work on multiple projects with different employers at the same time, which can reduce the feeling of psychological insecurity and job insecurity. In this sense, the feeling of safety can be reinforced by clear communication on the knowledge of tasks and goals and providing feedback on work. Similarly, Interviewee 2 (Senior Analyst) affirmed the following: “For this job, I get the feedback when I need it and everything is clear, so I do appreciate that [...]. I wouldn't feel comfortable working for an organization if I didn't feel I can contribute.”

The data structure is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 | Coding scheme for psychological safety



Source: Own elaboration

3.3 Involvement in workgroup

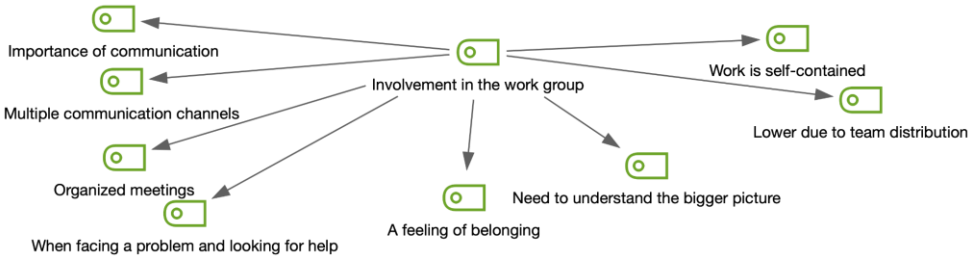
The analysis showed that in response to the question “what makes the employees included in a workgroup”, the prevalent component is communication, which appears to be critical in an online environment where employees work on individual tasks and interact with each other only on a weekly basis via emails and scheduled video chats while using multiple communication channels. Therefore, due to the individual character of task-oriented work, the importance of involvement in the workgroup is much lower for self-organizing teams, except for the use of scrum when the team shares the work status, potential obstacles and next steps or simply looks for advice when facing a problem. Interviewee 4 (Arts Director)

explained: “I only ask to meet all the members of the company to check if I feel included. Communication is the key here, especially because we don’t see each other daily. I prefer to communicate effectively and it makes me feel included.”

Having access to resources and information seems particularly important for self-sustained work in a “scheduled environment” (Interviewee 2, Senior Analyst) as a greater focus is on accessible information, inclusion of different communication means and styles and adaptation to individual needs. Interviewee 2 (Senior Analyst) explained that: “I guess with inclusive [...] I think of accessibility, and so including people with different communication means, so some people prefer and want to meet and have a conversation while others prefer an email, especially in distributed teams with different communication styles. For me inclusion means being open to having your employees specify how they want to communicate and what works best for them.”

Overall, it should be emphasized that the level of belonging seen through the lens of being involved in a workgroup is perceived as less important due to the task-oriented nature of the work and greater distribution of the team. The data structure is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4 | Coding scheme for involvement in workgroup



Source: Own elaboration

3.4 Feeling respected and valued

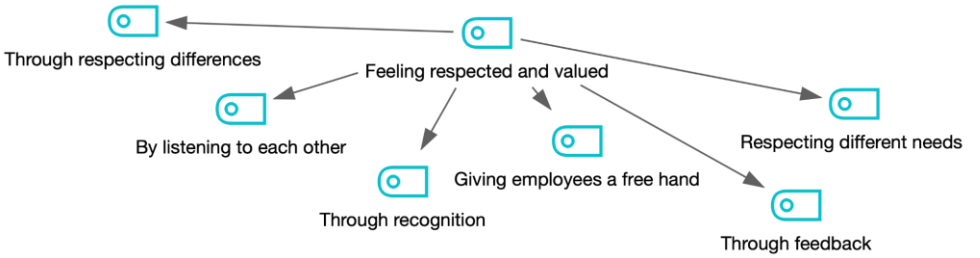
The interviewees indicated that respect can be expressed through recognition of individual contributions and receiving feedback on tasks. For example, Interviewee 2 (Senior Analyst) explained: “Something that has been good is that when I produced good content since I am primarily a writer and giving results is important, [My manager saying] like oh this is good and I got good results and you did a good job. I think just that information makes me feel that my contribution is respected.” Similar views were shared by Interviewee 1 (CEO) and Interviewee 4 (Art Director), for whom respect is an inherent element of an inclusive workplace if it is related to the appreciation of the individual performance as it “goes through the recognition of each other’s work” (Interviewee 4, Art Director).

The feeling of being valued and respected occurs when managers are willing to listen to different opinions and appreciate “everyone’s input” (Interviewee 3, Chief Editor), in particular in an agile environment where employees have different talents and areas of expertise that need to be applied collectively in a team. This perspective is closely linked with the managerial willingness to give employees the freedom to use their own judgment and to act according to their own wishes, in other words, “give employees a free hand”. The manager mentioned an employee who proposed a new direction of development which met with a

backlash, but because of the “empowerment perspective” and appreciation of the individual proposal (Interviewee 1, CEO), the idea was upheld. One of the key principles of agility is that employees need to value and build on each other’s ideas, and criticism of ideas is prohibited.

Finally, the dominant statements show the importance of respect not only for individual functional differences but also for individual “needs and support in order to be productive” (Interviewee 2, Senior Analyst), which is the critical element of creating an inclusive workplace for self-organizing teams. The data structure is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5 | Coding scheme for feeling respected and valued



Source: Own elaboration

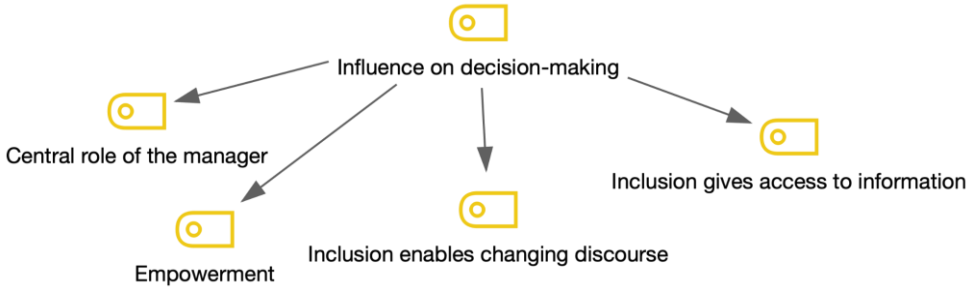
3.5 Influence on decision making

Due to the described specificity of the analysed organization – distributed and self-contained work – the influence on decision making was perceived as a consequence of inclusion rather than an inclusion practice and process per se. Interviewees emphasized that inclusion gives access to information and allows change in the discourse. Interviewee 1 summarized it as follows: “being in the inner circle, it has not only direct effects (..) [of] having access to information fast, being able to change company discourse, articulate faster and increase communication with others…”.

Therefore, the question arises whether influence on the decision-making process should remain in the category of inclusion practices and not instead be a consequence of introducing an inclusive workplace. On the one hand, the described organization – a startup, working in a dispersed way, based mostly on freelancers who perform self-contained work – is firmly committed to a self-managed working model with strongly empowered employees. As pointed out by Interviewee 1, this tendency towards empowerment is visible through the large degree of freedom that the CEO leaves to the managers and employees. However, the dispersed, virtual nature of the work limits the possibility of developing a fully self-managed team, as described by Interviewee 1: “Probably what would be amazing is to create such a strong team to function individually so they can create their own rules and regulations and start to be a hyper-performing team without me. But this usually happens in an environment where everybody sees each other every day, trusts each other and solves problems not through me but through themselves. In a distributed team company, it's more [that] I am [the] bottleneck in most tasks and I am the one driving as project manager most of them so it’s very hard for

the team to reach out to each other to solve problems, which I'm trying to do." The coding scheme is presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6 | Coding scheme for influence on decision making



Source: Own elaboration

3.6 Authenticity

The importance of authenticity was mentioned by Interviewee 3: "I don't think anyone is trying too hard to prove anything. I used to be in an agency where people would make things to prove themselves. It doesn't happen here. People do what they have to do and they say what they have to say. And there is a lot of confidence and sometimes, you used to have meetings in offices and somebody would stop the meeting without a reason. It doesn't happen here. We tend to solve our piece of work and get along with each other. You need to know your own space I think."

He also mentioned that the necessity for authenticity is a consequence of functional diversity in the organization: "I never try to bluff my way through a question because I'm not a technical man and there is a lot of technical work in this business, so I don't try to pretend things I don't know. I think people would rather prefer it if I do that. People know that I don't know something and they are much more perceptive of that in this organization. They don't want you to pretend something you don't know. I think that helps authenticity at work."

An interesting issue was mentioned by Interviewee 1. He admitted that the level of authenticity depends on the job position and the job role of the person with whom you interact. He pointed towards a necessity of "controlled" authenticity when interacting with a manager, as in his opinion full authenticity may even hinder communication. On the other hand, any kind of limitations of authenticity in contact with peers would result in an unnecessary loss of energy, which could be transferred into the task. The coding scheme is presented in Figure 7.

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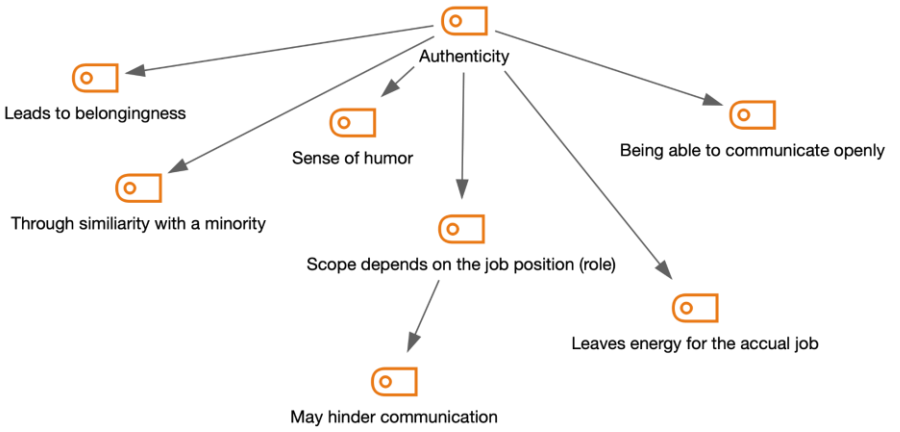
Figure 7 | Coding scheme for authenticity



Source: Own elaboration

3.7 Recognizing, honouring and advancing diversity

With recognizing, honouring and advancing diversity, an important differentiating factor of virtual startups like the one described in this paper is the fact that in many cases the employees are not fully aware of the differences and diversity dimensions represented by their coworkers. The focus is on skills and not directly on diversity. At first glimpse, it may look like a denial of the whole idea of recognizing, honouring and advancing diversity, but the focus of this company is mostly on functional, deep-level diversity. Although surface-level diversity is acknowledged, it is not as crucial as deep-level diversity. In this context, Interviewee 1 stated:

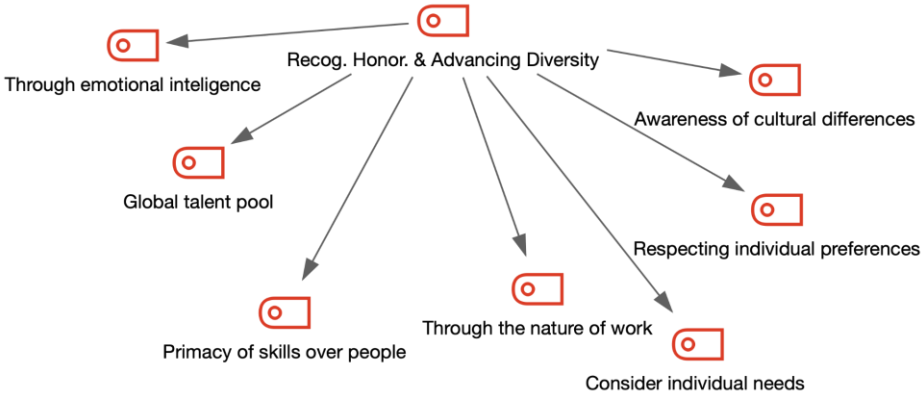
“It’s about skills so it's not about the person. I remember hiring somebody that was recommended for a certain skill without even having a conversation. We hired through a platform, they were a contractor that delivered a piece of work. I didn’t know the name, I didn’t know where they were, they had a pseudonym and they needed to deliver a server configuration. They came highly recommended, we did a trial and they did great in the trial. They did a full task and then got paid and that person – it was a guy from Slovenia but he could have been anybody from anywhere.”

The recognition, honouring and advancement of diversity were mostly visible in the statements about considering individuals' needs, respecting individual preferences, for example, with regard to the preferred communication channel, or simply understanding somebody else's needs and being able to anticipate them in order to allow the employees the freedom to focus on job-related tasks.

The capability to recognise, honour and advance diversity results from two factors. At the managerial level, the interviewees pointed towards the necessity to have a certain level of emotional intelligence. “As a manager [...] you can't belong to [every group] especially if you have [in your company] a vast diversity of skills and age, gender and all other diversities you

can imagine. You can't belong to all of them so the next best thing is to try to use emotional intelligence for vast areas of topics." The second factor is the nature of the geographically dispersed and virtual work as it allows building an organization employing people from all over the world but also people with disabilities, as pointed out by Interviewee 2: "Online work makes things more inclusive for a lot of people, including those with physical disabilities. I know quite a few people with various disabilities and it would make it very difficult for them to commute to work every day. At the top of my head, a lot of work in startups can be done from home." Interviewee 3 focused more on the aspect of geographically dispersed teams: "I worked with so many people in the last two years from all around the world because of COVID. However, I don't know whether you could get all that diversity if you were in the office. That could be more difficult. It's better because we do all meetings on Teams and you can actually get someone in Australia or China or India and they can do the job online so it's probably opening thoughts up."

Figure 8 | Coding scheme for recognizing, honouring and advancing diversity



Source: Own elaboration

3.8 Perceived inclusion

As already mentioned, the analysed organization recognizes, honours and tries to advance both surface-level diversity and deep-level diversity, and implements expressions of the practices and processes mentioned in the original model, albeit with a different focus. In the case of the analysed organization, all the interviewees spoke about crediting each other with the inclusionary practices and processes. This may be the biggest implication of the nature of the organization for the inclusive organization model. The fact that the startup is basically a self-managed organization with many self-contained job positions with a strongly emphasized need for inclusive communication points towards an egalitarian approach to inclusion, which may be perceived as a responsibility of the whole organization and of every individual employee.

"There are different parts of inclusion that we get differently. We have a lot of structure and thought that is put into presenting ourselves as inclusive. But we need to find a way to do it without broadcasting it outside to the world so all the effort that is [normally] put in words [we put] into our results-driven framework (...) Do we create an inclusive environment in this company? I think so, by the diversity that we have in a team (..)" (Interviewee 1).

Surprisingly, the perceived inclusion was not associated with the employee's team identity and perceived status differences. It can be argued that there is a positive relationship between perceived inclusion at all levels of organization and performance and employees' perception of their roles and experiences in a virtual and agile environment. One possible reason may be that the agile startup emphasizes individuals and interactions in the team over formal processes and tools and the individual capacity to "change direction very fast" (Interviewee 1). Therefore, the data show that a climate for inclusion involves increased interactions among employees and exposure to distinct ideas, which may potentially lead to a change in the existing situation.

3.9 Inclusion climate

The findings show that the inclusion climate goes beyond the simple categorization of insider and outsider, and it is associated with the use of humour at work and open communication, which underpins an inclusive climate by contributing to a dynamic and flexible atmosphere described by the interviewees as "convivial, dynamic and eclectic [...] much more informal than in a traditional organization" (Interviewee 4) or "light and chill" (Interviewee 2). The recurrent statement is that the atmosphere of flexibility and understanding allows the team to be a "creative group [...] and produce something outstanding in terms of work" (Interviewee 4). These data are consistent with the opinions of managers who believe that an inclusive climate provides flexibility regarding "deadlines and timelines" (Interviewee 1) and enables employees to focus on objectives and tasks, thus creating a results-driven environment and inclusive climate of expertise.

3.10 Retention and expansion of talent

Retention and expansion are the consequences of inclusive practices and processes (management promotion orientation), but there is a lack of evidence of compliance practices in this regard. The lack of focus on promotion practices can be explained by the fact that freelance workers are engaged in short-term projects and scheduled tasks with an expiration date. However, management sees the importance of inclusion to attract and retain the talents that are critical for an organization, arguing that: "I think we are obliged to facilitate it in any shape or form as the war of talent is extremely tense and we need to find our way to attract the right people and to keep them" (Interviewee 1). Also, the expansion of talent is manifested through the organizational statement on the website showing the openness to remote work, stating the following: "We promote remote working, so you can work from wherever you want in the world."

3.11 Consequences of an inclusive organization

The model of Shore et al. (2018) "ends" with three categories: perceived inclusion, inclusion climate and retention and expansion of talent. Describing the particular elements of the model, the authors suggested the possible organizational consequences of developing an inclusive organization based on the presented model. Referring to previous research, they stated that an inclusive organization would lead to job satisfaction, increased leader-member exchange, organizational commitment, well-being, decreased stress and decreased turnover. The present paper suggests other possible consequences of an inclusive climate

which may be of special importance for a geographically distributed, virtual startup. The interviewees suggested that authenticity, which is a crucial element of an inclusive organization, enables information sharing among employees: "...you will freely provide information to somebody that is feeling at ease" (Interviewee 1). An inclusive work environment may also promote creativity and consequently may contribute to creating and maintaining a competitive advantage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the presented results are based solely on one case study of one organization, they show that inclusion and inclusive organizational behaviour are important and difficult topics for modern companies. The paper analysed the possibility of using a well-established inclusion model (Shore et al., 2018) in such a specific organization. It was established that in most cases the model can still apply. The major difference between the traditional model and the new setting is the changing role of the top management, which in an agile startup does not play such a significant role, as the organization is working based on virtual, self-organizing teams. Therefore, the commitment and focus on the enhancement of inclusion or prevention of exclusion are implicit. According to Burleson et al. (2022), organizations may face new challenges in adapting inclusion to remote work environments, which may change the way in which employees perceive inclusion.

This paper provides an important contribution to the ongoing theoretical debate. Hung et al. (2021) found that it is easier for individuals with a similar background to foster relationships and develop mutual trust. The presented research supports these findings as the interviewees suggested difficulties in communication when the cultural and cognitive differences between the parties were wide. Researchers have found that communication between team members is an important factor of inclusion (Gajendran & Joshi, 2011; Hung et al., 2021; Wolfgruber et al., 2021). Hung et al. (2021) also established that an inclusive climate may enhance collaboration. The research presented in this paper also supports these findings, showing that the interviewees perceived inclusion as a requirement for performance but also stated that performance supports inclusion. The link between inclusion and performance has been explored previously in the literature (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023).

A strength of this research is that the organizational and individual set of inclusion considerations is supported by other researchers in this area. Many of the dimensions of inclusion echo the elements proposed by Ferdman & Davidson (2002), Mor Barak (2015), Shore et al. (2011; 2018) and Pelled et al. (1999), providing empirical support for their theoretical models as well as expanding on the components proposed in their models. In this sense, this paper provides a more comprehensive approach to an inclusive workplace model. For example, Ferdman & Davidson (2002) highlighted elements of an inclusive workplace such as the importance of clear guidelines and employee feedback, as well as the ability to benefit from the uniqueness of each individual to conduct meaningful tasks and contribute to decision making, which has been shown in the present paper. This study also confirms other studies on inclusion which highlight the importance of open communication and the capacity to provide meaningful feedback to employees (Ferdman, 2010), autonomy to make decisions (Gasorek, 2000; Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998) and access to information (Pelled et al., 1999). This paper expands on the contexts where inclusion has been explored, providing insights into how it may be implemented in different organizational environments (Chanlat & Özbilgin, 2017; Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019). The case study provides insights

into how inclusion is lived and perceived in a virtual startup hiring geographically dispersed teams. It appears that institutional approaches are less important in shaping the meaning of an inclusive workplace in the case of a small virtual startup. However, the cultural differences between the team members and the role they play in creating an inclusive workplace through cooperation and communication should be explored further.

The paper also has some practical, managerial implications by showing the importance of communication and differentiation of communication channels for effective inclusion in the organization. Furthermore, the paper shows that even for an organization relying on virtuality, where employees assert “we can be whoever we want to be”, authenticity plays a crucial role in promoting inclusion and thus needs to be promoted and nurtured. The paper also showed the importance of psychological safety for employee performance, creativity and competitive advantage.

The limitations of the study lie in its single-case analysis, restricting the ability to draw broad generalizations. While this design is not inherently limiting, it does highlight the need for further empirical exploration across a more diverse sample of geographically dispersed startups operating in virtual settings. Future research avenues might delve deeper into the role of cultural differences in fostering inclusive workplaces within such virtual startups, exploring how they affect communication, cooperation and overall inclusivity. Moreover, the focus of our study on a specific model of inclusion may overlook other potentially effective inclusion dimensions or models that could significantly influence inclusive workplace dynamics in these settings. Exploring alternative models or dimensions of inclusion could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how virtual, geographically dispersed startups cultivate inclusivity. Additionally, the study might benefit from a longitudinal approach or comparative analysis, observing changes in inclusivity perceptions and practices over time or comparing different types of geographically dispersed startups. This could offer a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of inclusive practices and their effectiveness within these organizations. Lastly, further research could delve into the intricate relationship between authenticity and psychological safety and their effects on employee performance, creativity and competitive advantage in virtual startups. Understanding the interplay of these factors could provide more practical insights for fostering inclusive environments in similar organizational setups.

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