

An exec summary of our globally dispersed teams (GDTs) research project

The paradox of the virtual office:

A qualitative analysis of individuals' experience of working in globally dispersed teams

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Executive summary

Organisations are increasingly using globally dispersed teams (GDTs) to succeed in the global economy and whilst quantitative research is plentiful, few qualitative studies exist that explore individuals' experience of what it means to work in a team which is to some degree physically isolated by time and space.

As such, we contribute to the literature by presenting findings from a qualitative study based on seven focus groups, including 34 colleagues from a global organisation spread throughout the UK, France and the US. Six focus groups were conducted via a web-conferencing tool and one session conducted face-to-face. All groups followed the same questioning route, centred around their experience of working in a globally dispersed team at their organisation.

Focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis; it is one of the most common qualitative methods used to analyse textual data sets where the researcher seeks to draw out concepts or themes of meaning in the data which are relevant to the research aims. We used an inductive approach, meaning themes or concepts within the data were used to generate a theory (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). As such, we were not imposed upon or restricted by previous theory or frameworks. The process of analysis involved: transcribing recordings, immersion in the data by listening and re-listening to the sessions, descriptive coding, interpretative coding, generating overarching themes and finally the report write up. This was a cyclical process, moving back and forth between stages, always ensuring analysis was grounded in the individuals' accounts and the data.

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Findings

Three main themes were generated: identity and belonging; trust and autonomy; education and support. Each of these had sub-themes, which can be seen in the thematic map below. Interestingly, we also found paradoxes within these themes. From this we propose a model for optimal employee experience in GDTs. (Fig. 2)

Identity and belonging

This overarching theme encapsulates the need to belong and be connected to others; a prominent recurring need reflected through commentary relating to relationships with colleagues at work. Indeed, it was clear that work included not just task-related aspects but the social, relational and emotional components inherent when working with others. This need was just as important, if not heightened because of the geographic and temporal dispersion, which made it harder to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. As an example, a lack of face-to-face connection and being 'out of sight' were highlighted as factors which thwart this need for connection and belonging in GDTs. A couple of key findings were:

- Empathy is much harder to demonstrate in GDTs where computer-mediated communication dominates, and tone of voice, body language is not always seen
- Not being able to see colleagues in their day-to-day work can lead to individuals interpreting behaviour in the least respectful way i.e. thinking the worst about someone's behaviour rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt, or making negative judgments about a colleague's behaviour or an event without all the relevant information
- All of this lack of face-to-face interaction makes it harder to develop meaningful connections

Trust and autonomy

This theme encapsulates the need for individuals to be trusted to work flexibly and to have autonomy over their working environment, location and hours. Having this flexibility was said to maximise productivity as well as bolster wellbeing. A few additional findings were:

- The best of both worlds was described as having the balance to work from home and the office so that the benefits of each environment can be experienced
- For flexible working to be a success, trust from leaders and managers is key. This trust promotes engagement and job satisfaction
- Managers who set strict boundaries, and are more controlling, tend to demoralise individuals and not promote engagement or job satisfaction

Education and support

This theme reflects the need to be taught and given the right support to be able to optimally work in a GDT and feel a level of mastery over this new way of working. Firstly, individuals need support to learn how to adapt their mindset so that GDTs are viewed as an opportunity to grow and develop and not a hinderance. Only then can the outcomes of the tools and strategies learned be realised. Our data suggests that such tools individuals and teams require education on include:

- How to involve remote workers
- How to make time-zones work to their advantage
- How to use technology effectively

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Paradoxes

Throughout our data we found several paradoxes of working in a GDT which are useful when applying this research. These include:

- Paradox 1:** Despite increased flexibility, employees still require some structure to their working day; they need a set working space away from home life and reasonable working hours to enable them to switch off from work.
- Paradox 2:** Employees need to have a sense of volition over their working methods however they still require education and support to be able to work in such an autonomous way.
- Paradox 3:** In order to feel a sense of belonging employees within GDTs need face-to-face contact time, especially at project kick-off. This enables relationships to be built and virtually sustained thereafter.
- Paradox 4:** The reliance on technology is huge, however the technology provided and support on how to use it is paramount.
- Paradox 5:** Work is often achieved through social interaction; informal social interaction with colleagues should therefore still be considered work. This may occur away from the office, however, access to these social activities is limited for employees based on location. For example, remote colleagues may be excluded from social gatherings occurring near the office because they are physically distant.

GDT focus group research: thematic map

How do individuals experience being part of a GDT?

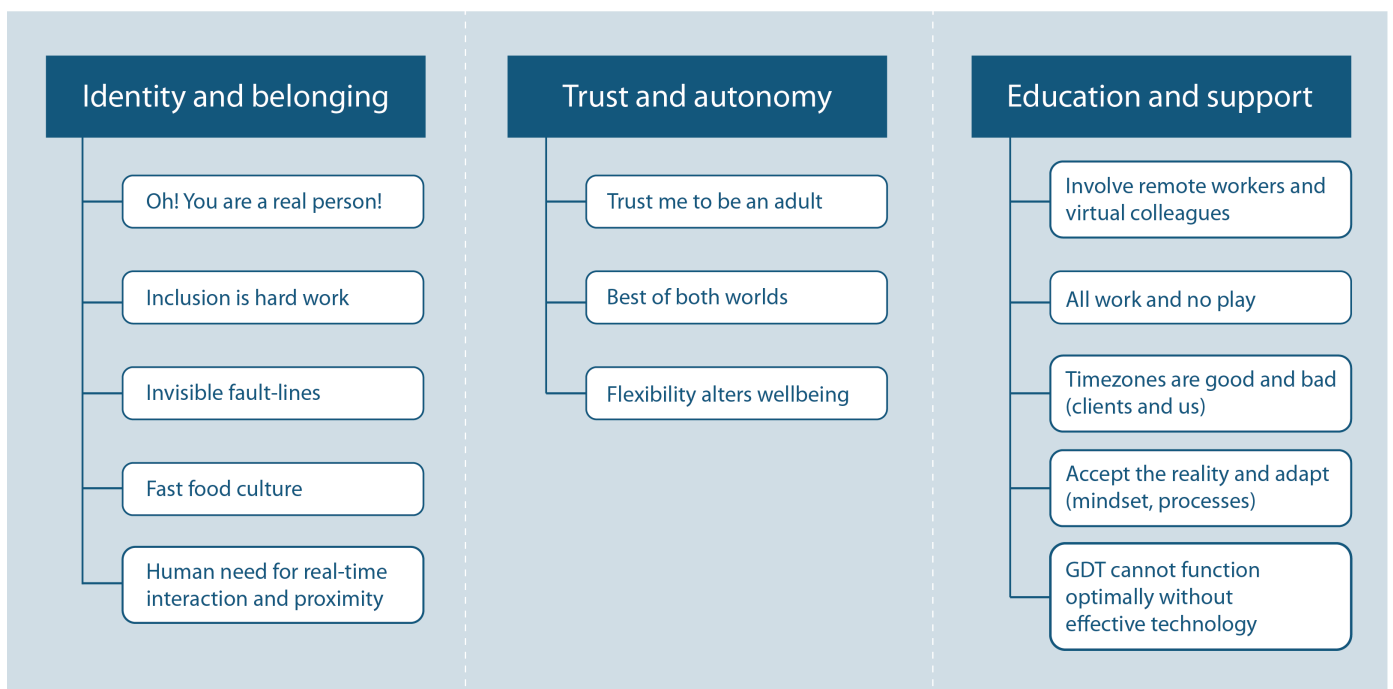


Figure 1: Thematic map representing individuals' experience of working in GDT. Here we can see the three over-arching themes with their sub-ordinate themes underneath. These are explained in the full report.

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Conclusion

We set out with the aim of exploring individuals' experience of working as part of a GDT. Our results show that individuals require a sense of identity and belonging, to be trusted and to have some sense of autonomy over their working methods, as well as the right education and support to be able to work effectively as part of a GDT.

Application

From our data, we suggest that to create optimal employee experience, all three needs should be satisfied, meaning that employees:

1. Experience a sense of belonging to their team
2. Are trusted to do their job and can share decisions on how, where and when they work
3. Are supported to work in a GDT, this involves: education on how to work in GDTs, and access to effective technology

We propose that when employees experience all three they are likely to be more motivated to succeed and work as part of a successful GDT. It would likely result in increased job satisfaction, wellbeing and productivity. However, if just two of these needs are satisfied it is not sufficient to create such outcomes (see Fig.2).

Here are some suggestions on how to overcome the paradoxes we found:

Application 1:

All employees advised to have a distinct working space when working away from the office.

Application 2:

Employees should be asked how they would like to work, what suits their working needs best and where possible this should be implemented. This requires:

- Employees understanding how their environment impacts productivity and wellbeing
- Employees understanding what structure suits them best and having support to be able to flex their working day and methods to suit this
- Having a two-way adult relationship with manager/leader to support this; leaders cannot help employees unless they know what suits them best
- Guidelines and support should be given to enable employees to work in various conditions, e.g. how to deal with loneliness when working from home

Application 3:

Schedule face-to-face meetings for teams, especially at project kick-off.

Application 4:

Employees should have equal access to technology and resource where possible when working remotely, and be educated on how best to use it for the purpose it is intended.

Application 5:

Involve remote workers and virtual colleagues in social gatherings; implement creative ways to ensure everyone can have social interaction of some kind.

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The proposed model for optimal employee experience when working in a GDT

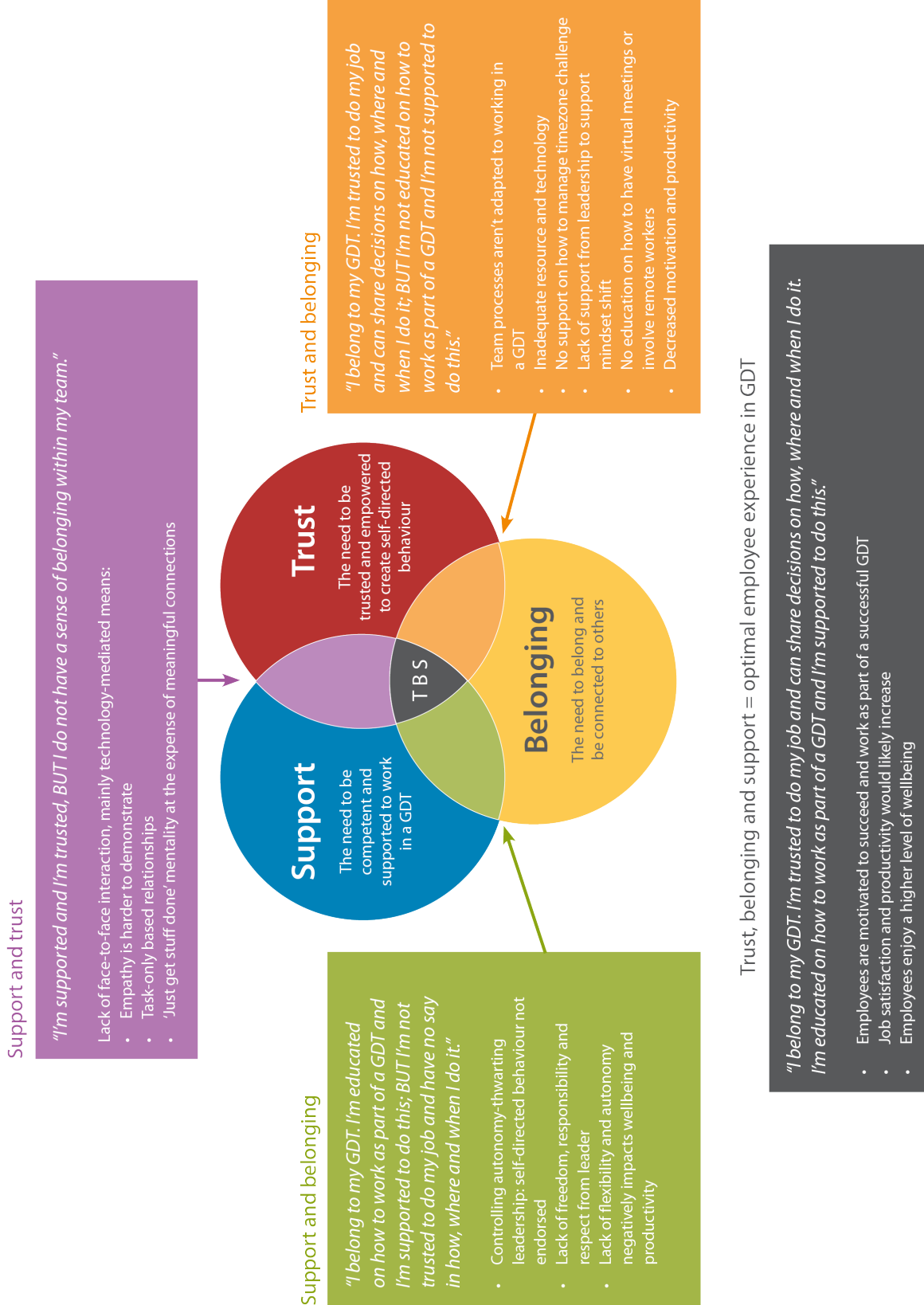


Figure 2: Our proposed model for optimal employee experience when working in a GDT.