



Leadership and telework in Morocco : an exploratory study on the involvement and commitment of teleworkers

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Abstract :

The aim of this paper is to examine and evaluate the crucial role of leadership in remote team engagement and satisfaction, as well as the issues and challenges associated with teleworking. This article aims to approach and explore the topic from a different perspective by focusing on a mix of theoretical literature and empirical analysis. We therefore propose a case analysis carried out within a Moroccan company specialising in mobile development. This case analysis gives us a better perspective on the challenges and issues associated with remote leadership in a concrete situation. The findings of the study indicate that well-managed remote leadership has a beneficial influence on employee effectiveness, tenacity, commitment and satisfaction.

Keywords: remote leadership, virtual team, remote management, control, case study

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1. Introduction

In a constantly changing economic context, driven by technological advancements and amplified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies are facing new challenges to maintain their competitiveness and ensure their continuity. Globalization has increased the level of competition on a global scale, which has contributed to the shift towards remote work. Faced with this situation, companies of all sizes are concerned about their evolution in telework, prioritizing the management and satisfaction of employees through effective leadership. Indeed, the continuity of an organization lies in the evolution and strengthening of its human resources, which must be creative and competent to go beyond the traditional role of personnel administration and offer a favorable work environment. However, most surveys conducted by organizations focus on external customer satisfaction and neglect internal customer satisfaction, which is the satisfaction of employees who are the invisible hand behind the organization's performance. Remote management is not a new concept, but it has become a necessity after the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual teams are composed of members from different locations who use information and communication technologies to interact with each other. Studies have highlighted the benefits of virtual teams, such as diversity of expertise and perspectives, as well as cost savings in terms of time, money, and stress. However, reaching a consensus can be difficult in virtual teams, as members cannot benefit from the richness of face-to-face interactions and the lack of nonverbal cues makes it harder to understand communication nuances. Building trust and shared responsibility among team members, as well as the challenges of monitoring and managing virtual teams, can also be difficulties.

Managing teams in telework presents unique and complex challenges that differ from those encountered in a traditional work environment. Leaders must possess key skills to overcome obstacles and maintain hierarchical authority. Studies on remote leadership highlight two main challenges that organizations face: challenges related to power and control, and those related to communication and interpersonal relationships. Despite the abundance of research on telework, there are significant gaps in the documentation regarding the determinants of effective leadership practices in a telework context. This article aims to develop an integrative model that improves existing models and validates the proposed model through a qualitative approach. The main objective is to identify the challenges faced by virtual teams and propose strategies to improve their performance and achieve set goals. More specifically, we aim to understand the influence of leadership in managing and satisfying a virtual team, as well as the challenges of engaging them. This raises important questions, such as:

- How to prevent isolation and maintain a sense of connection with the team when working remotely?
- What communication strategies can be put in place to ensure effective and transparent communication in a virtual work environment?
- How can leaders establish clear objectives and expectations for their remote team?
- How can leaders evaluate the performance and productivity of their remote team?
- What training and development strategies can be put in place to help remote team members develop the necessary skills to work effectively in a virtual environment?

To answer these questions and achieve our objective, we present an in-depth case study of a Moroccan company that has adopted telework since 2014. This study offers a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities related to leadership in a virtual work environment. The structure of our article will be presented as follows: We will first focus on the literature review to better understand the concepts related to remote leadership, secondly, we will present the methodology adopted, and finally we will discuss the results obtained, while proposing some avenues for future researchers to explore.

2. Literature Review

Despite the abundance of research on telework, studies on effective leadership in this context are rare and often limited to theoretical approaches. To fill this gap, we conducted a literature review to examine the main challenges and factors that influence the performance of virtual teams. We identified four key factor categories: leadership, remote management, remote control, and effective communication. Our objective is to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence the performance of virtual teams and propose ways to improve leadership practices in the telework context. Studies are unanimous on a key point: the exercise of leadership by a manager plays a determining role in the success of telework (Gibson et al., 2002; Hambley et al., 2007; Kirk, Belovics, 2006; Konradt, Hoch 2007; Neufeld, Fang, 2005). Indeed, a manager of teleworkers must be able to influence, motivate, and mobilize employees, share their vision of the organization, and communicate effectively with them through technological means, despite distance (Avolio et al., 2000). This leadership context presents two major particularities: the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a preferred means of interaction with employees and the impact of physical distance on work relationships. As a result, the mode of communication, influence dynamics, teamwork, trust, control, technology management, power games, roles, social networks, and work processes are all modified (Avolio, Kahai, Dodge, 2000; Gajendran, Harrison, 2007; Gibson, Blackwell, Dominicis, Demerath, 2002). Given the profound transformation of work relationships, managers must adapt and adopt new leadership practices to remain effective. This is essential for companies to fully benefit from telework (Fisher, 2001; Garton, Wegryn, 2006). To achieve this, it is necessary to combine effective leadership, advanced management, exercised control, and a comprehensive communication strategy. This will enable companies to maximize the benefits of telework while maintaining effective communication and productive collaboration among team members.

2.1. "Distance Leadership or E-Leadership"

The use of virtual teams is becoming increasingly common in the professional lives of companies due to the emergence of information and communication technologies. Virtual teams can be defined as a group of colleagues from different departments or business units working together to achieve a common goal. They are often dispersed in space, time, and organizational boundaries. These teams have a low frequency of face-to-face contact and collaborate using emerging computer and communication technologies to accomplish a specific task or project (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000; Igarria et al., 1999; Speier & Palmer, 1998; Townsend et al., 1998; Geber, 1995). Some researchers define virtual teams as a global group composed of members from different countries and cultures (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Kristof et al., 1995). The progress of communication technologies makes virtual teams indispensable to companies today. Lipnack & Stamps (1997) argue that human and

organizational factors are essential to ensure the success of virtual teams. They propose a "people/purpose/link" model in which nine principles for managing virtual teams are derived. When virtual teams enter the development phase of the team life cycle, members share leadership, undertake interdependent tasks, and engage in various boundary-spanning interactions. However, a virtual team cannot achieve its goals without the direction and guidance of a leader who guides members towards learning and task accomplishment.

2.1.1. Definitions and Origins of Leadership

Leadership is conceived as an organizational discipline that refers to the influence of a leader on an individual or group of individuals in order to lead them towards better achievement of objectives and a better work climate. In the same vein, remote leadership is defined as a multidimensional process that involves managing, supervising, directing, and controlling teams that are located in different places. The concept of remote leadership was initially introduced by Bogardus (1927) and further developed by Katz and Kahn (1978), who made a brief reference to this phenomenon, but it was also revived by Napier and Ferris (1993), Shamir (1995), Waldman and Yammarino (1999), and Yammarino (1994). For them, the distance between the leader and their collaborators is considered as: (a) an essential condition that refers to the emergence of charismatic leadership (Katz and Kahn, 1978), (b) a moderating act of charismatic leadership that could appear (Shamir, 1995, Yagil, 1998), (c) a neutralizer that limits the influence of leaders' behaviors on collaborators (Howell et al., 1997, Kerr and Jermier, 1978). However, one is tempted to assimilate "remote leadership" and "e-leadership", whereas e-leadership refers to the use of technological means to direct, control, and manage a team remotely, while remote leadership is the ability of a leader to direct a physically distant team, regardless of the method used. In their integrative studies of "remote leadership", Napier and Ferris postulate that at the top level of the organization, understanding the major role of interpersonal distance in organizations is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of the workplace, but there is no theory that adopts the diversity of distance within the organization, it is a process often neglected (Napier and Ferris 1993, p. 321). In the same vein, Yukl's work (1999) highlighted the lack of attention paid to remote leadership in the 1990s. However, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, this topic has gained new momentum and many studies have been conducted to explore the principles of remote leadership. This period marked a turning point in research on remote leadership, which is now considered a field of study in its own right.

2.2.2. Conceptual Framework of Remote Leadership Practices: State of Knowledge, Theoretical Perspectives, and Empirical Studies.

The primary objective of virtual teams is not to connect people, but to offer them the advantage of working on the same project from different locations and time zones, so that they encounter no difficulties in their work. Moreover, team members are more likely to feel confident and trust leaders who exhibit attributes of conscientiousness, such as organization, reliability, and a strong work ethic (Bartone et al., 2009). Virtual team members are also more likely to consider leaders as reliable and trustworthy if they exhibit emotional stability, as evidenced by their ability to remain calm and composed under pressure (Cogliser et al., 2012). However, recent research has highlighted the importance of analyzing and studying virtual teams, emphasizing

the need for effective leadership to improve communication, collaboration, motivation, and performance of these teams.

Digital Transformation and Adoption of ERP/CRM Systems: Digital transformation has opened up new perspectives on the impact of advanced technologies on management. The integration of ERP/CRM systems is considered a key factor in improving the accuracy, efficiency, and consistency of management processes (Davenport, 2013; Gupta & George, 2016). These technologies enable companies to centralize and standardize their data, which facilitates decision-making and operational control. Studies by Dong (2008) and Loonam & McDonagh (2005) have shown that active management support is essential for the successful implementation of ERP/CRM systems. Strong and committed leadership enables overcoming organizational resistance and promoting the adoption of new technologies, thus ensuring successful integration and effective leadership.

Leadership, a Key Factor in the Success of Telework: An Analysis of Studies by Brown et al. (2021) and Pyöriä (2011) The discussion on whether telework improves or impairs worker performance has been ongoing for two decades, with conflicting results (Brown et al., 2021; Pyöriä, 2011). This may be due to variability in operationalizing performance measures (Brown, 2021), as well as other organizational factors that can influence these relationships, such as leadership. Therefore, further research is needed to identify and design work environments that promote different types of performance. Leadership is an essential element to consider, as managers play a crucial role in the success of telework. Indeed, their ability to manage and motivate remote teams is critical to the success of telework, as they can help resolve the challenges of telework and support both individual and collective performance (Avolio et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2023; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Kozlowski et al., 2021; Peiró et al., 2024; Zeike et al., 2019). Recent research highlights that leadership in telework requires more than simply extending traditional leadership practices to virtual environments. It demands the development of specific skills to effectively manage remote work (Alkhayyal & Bajaba, 2023; Contreras et al., 2020; Delanoeiye & Verbruggen, 2020). In this context, Peiró and Martínez-Tur (2022) propose that managers must adapt their behaviors and develop new ones that adequately respond to a digitized and geographically dispersed work environment.

Nelson and Coopriider's Shared Knowledge Model: Given that organizational knowledge is inherent in creation and resides with individuals (Nonaka & Konno, 1998), a major management problem arises regarding how to transform individual competence into organizational knowledge. In particular, members of virtual teams who come from different business organizations often possess distinct areas of knowledge, it is very important for virtual team members to share their skills during the collaborative process so that they can effectively solve problems and complete the task efficiently. Therefore, how to promote the exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge among team members is a fundamental question currently. Nelson and Coopriider (1996) proposed a shared knowledge model from the perspective of interpersonal interactions, which established mutual trust and mutual influence as important antecedents that lead to sharing knowledge. Therefore, knowledge-sharing behavior is considered in this study as "the degree to which virtual team members actually share their mutual knowledge with other members for project tasks under the direction and supervision of the leader".

"Leading at a Distance" in Leader-Subordinate Relationships Research on high-quality and close relationships in general (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis et al., 2000), and particularly in the workplace (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Kark, 2011), shows the importance of relationships for life meaning, happiness, self-esteem, well-being, growth, and individual health. Research on workplace relationships has focused on identifying stages of relationship development (Schinoff et al., 2020), underlying dimensions shaping relationships, such as interpersonal similarity (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018), and the role of context in shaping relationships (Ferris et al., 2009). Relationship-oriented behaviors have been part of leadership research for decades. The very definition of leadership implies the existence of a relationship with subordinates, as it often involves bidirectional influence (Uhl-Bien, 2011). From early research defining leadership behaviors as task-oriented or people-oriented (Stogdill & Coons, 1957), to more recent work focusing on relational leadership (Fletcher, 2007), the leadership literature has emphasized the importance of relationships for leaders, subordinates, and organizations (e.g., Dutton, 2003) and its positive consequences (e.g., Hackney et al., 2018).

We propose that "making distance" is a specific form of leader-subordinate relationship management that is an aspect of leaders' sense-making and efforts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), by communicating messages about the leader, subordinates, and their relationship. Previous research on leader-subordinate distance has considered it as a contextual and stable aspect that affects leadership behavior (Liden & Antonakis, 2009), leader perceptions (Shamir, 1995; Yagil, 1998), leader-subordinate relationships (Torres & Bligh, 2012), subordinate psychological states (e.g., efficacy; Cole et al., 2009; Story et al., 2013), performance (Bonet & Salvador, 2017), and effectiveness (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Distance has also been examined as a moderator of the effect of transformational leadership on outcomes, showing mixed effects, such as greater distance being associated with both negative outcomes (e.g., decreased performance; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999) and positive outcomes (e.g., increased collective efficacy beliefs; Cole et al., 2009).

We argue that leader-subordinate distance is not just a contextual element of relationships (Ferris et al., 2009), but that leaders can modify certain aspects of their distance to achieve various objectives. This idea is suggested in the definition of perceived social distance by Antonakis and Atwater (2002), according to which leaders can "maximize their status and power differences" (p. 674). However, to our knowledge, no work has examined distance as an element of leadership that is constructed and/or modified - i.e., implemented - by leaders themselves as a management practice. Thus, we focus on how leaders implement distance, as indicated, for example, by perceived accessibility, immediacy, openness, and formality in the leader-subordinate relationship. Although the idea that leaders can shape their distance with subordinates has not been explicitly conceptualized or directly tested empirically, supporting evidence can be found in the literature.

2.2.3. Theoretical Framework

Leading virtual teams requires an in-depth understanding of leadership theories that can be applied to enhance organizational performance and make effective strategic decisions. Here are the main theories of virtual team management that can be used in the context of remote leadership :

Transformational Leadership Theory: This theory is defined as a leadership approach that causes change in individuals and social systems. In its ideal form, it creates valuable and

positive change in followers, with the ultimate goal of developing followers into leaders. James MacGregor Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transformational leadership in his descriptive research on political leaders. For him, transformational leadership is a process in which "leaders and followers help each other to reach a higher level of morale and motivation". Burns emphasized the difficulty of distinguishing between management and leadership, and argued that the differences lie in the characteristics and behaviors. He established two concepts: "transformational leadership" and "transactional leadership". According to Burns, the transformational approach creates significant change in the lives of individuals and organizations. It redefines perceptions and values, and modifies the expectations and aspirations of employees. Unlike the transactional approach, it does not rely on a "give and take" relationship, but on the leader's personality, traits, and ability to create change through example, articulation of an energizing vision, and stimulating goals. Transformational leaders are idealized in the sense that they are moral examples of work for the benefit of the team, organization, and/or community. Burns theorized that transformational and transactional leadership styles were mutually exclusive. Transactional leaders generally do not seek to change the organizational culture, but work within the existing culture, while transformational leaders may try to change the organizational culture.

Laissez-Faire Leadership Theory: This theory is defined as a leadership style characterized by an absence of responsibility and intervention with employees (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008b; Skogstad et al., 2014). This style of leadership is manifested by avoiding decision-making, weak use of authority (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003), and a lack of feedback given to employees (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). This leadership style is considered to be highly ineffective and unsatisfying for employees (Bass & Bass, 2008). It can lead to a loss of motivation, decreased productivity, and increased turnover. It is essential to note that laissez-faire leadership can have negative consequences on employees and the organization as a whole. Therefore, it is crucial for leaders to develop effective leadership skills to motivate and inspire their teams.

Authentic Leadership Theory: This theory is a complex notion that involves followers, groups, and organizations (Avolio et al., 2004). It requires the leader to be self-aware, consistent with their values, and authentic in their interactions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The key characteristics of authentic leadership include high self-awareness, ability to self-regulate, honesty and openness to others, courage to act in accordance with their values, a sense of ethics and positive moral values, and an interest in the development and success of others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These characteristics enable authentic leaders to create a positive and productive work environment, where employees feel valued and motivated to achieve their goals (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leaders create an environment that inspires employees to express their true selves, take ownership of their work, and engage in innovative behaviors. By fostering a climate of trust and openness, authentic leaders empower employees to challenge the status quo, think outside the box, and explore new possibilities. Nevertheless, there are other theories that complement this leadership approach and also address the key role of the leader in managing virtual teams, such as:

Social Exchange Theory (SET): This is a theoretical perspective that considers interpersonal interactions as exchanges of behaviors, affects, products, and communications (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1978). It involves intangible costs and benefits and is not governed by explicit rules or agreements. Social exchanges are similar to economic exchanges,

but do not guarantee equivalent reciprocal rewards (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Blau, 1964; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). SET has been applied in many fields, including marketing and management (Anderson & Narus, 1984; Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). In the context of virtual teams, SET suggests that the leader plays a foundational role in ensuring and guaranteeing the exchange, by creating an environment where individuals can share their knowledge and maximize their rewards while minimizing their costs (LaGaipa, 1977; Nye, 1979; Emerson, 1981).

Knowledge Sharing Theory: Knowledge is a key strategic resource for companies, defined as information validated by evidence tests (Liebeskind, 1996). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), knowledge includes tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is personal and contextual, while explicit knowledge is transmissible through language. Polanyi (1966) emphasizes that tacit knowledge is acquired through learning and experience. This study introduces the concept of knowledge representativeness, which measures the degree to which knowledge is expressed in verbal, symbolic, or written form. Tacit knowledge is thus defined as "unexpressible knowledge", while explicit knowledge is "knowledge existing in symbolic or written form". Remote work poses significant challenges for leaders and teams. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to develop effective strategies to prevent isolation, maintain communication, and establish clear objectives. Leaders must also be able to evaluate the performance and productivity of their remote team and implement training and development strategies to help team members develop the skills needed to work effectively in a virtual environment. This leads to our first hypothesis: H1: Remote leadership influences the ability of teams to achieve their objectives.

2.3. Remote Management

According to Barthe (2001), Villette (2009), and Sonkeng et al. (2012), remote management refers to the physical separation of a manager from their team, this new management mode aims to distance the manager physically from their teams, resulting in the absence of direct control and guidance, as well as confusion, both for managers and their teams. The importance of remote management lies in the globalization of the economy, the growth and acceleration of exchanges (Barni, 2003; Rolland, 2010; Mokline, 2017; Smeltzer, 2020). The development of new information and communication technologies has greatly contributed to making this type of management, which was once reserved for certain professions and hierarchical levels, now widespread and in high demand for the development of matrix organizations, project-based structures, and telecommuting (Ray, 2001; Fernandez and Marrald, 2014; Jauréguiberry, 2010). However, since the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a strong focus on this topic, as well as numerous studies conducted to understand telecommuting and manage virtual teams. This evolution in the work environment, specifically the dissociation of employees from their workplaces, leads to executing tasks and transmitting work results from anywhere while maintaining permanent contact with managers (Pontier, 2014). In reality, it is no longer necessary to be present in the office daily to work, which allows employees to break free from the classic schedule and workplace schema. With ICTs, information becomes easily accessible and available in all aspects, and it takes on different forms. We mention video conferencing, instant messaging, emails, and direct chat, which facilitate contact between telecommuters and their managers and colleagues, and enable them to retrieve the information they need. The internet revolution and globalization have changed the world profoundly, allowing companies to be more flexible and open to new developments and technologies. It is

enough to have a phone with an internet connection to work from anywhere in the world. Remote management is not a new concept, but it is often confused with e-management, which is a branch of remote management that is more relevant to traditional companies than virtual companies and is limited in its remote management processes (Ivanaj and Bozon, 2016). However, remote management presents challenges related to distance, which must be taken into account to establish and maintain an effective relationship between managers and team members. This is essential to foster innovation and improve the performance of virtual teams. Therefore, we formulate our second hypothesis: H2: The association of remote leadership and remote management fosters innovation and improves team performance.

2.4. Remote Control

Remote control is a concept developed by the spatio-temporal dimension that telecommuting installs (Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006). It refers to the action taken to exert a certain authority over employees to verify and monitor their tasks on a daily basis. According to Taskin (2006), there are three fundamental rules related to the implementation of remote control. Firstly, the rule of place, which means that hierarchy is not obliged to be physically present to exert control. Secondly, it deviates from action, given that telecommuting is an organizational work mode that requires the company to be open to changes and flexible in decision-making to face unforeseen events and control them. Finally, telecommuting deviates from the rule of time, Taskin asserts that it is difficult to apply temporal control over telecommuters who perform a multitude of tasks that are not measurable in time (Taskin, 2006). He emphasizes a crucial reflection based on the notions of freedom and autonomy before controlling, for him, autonomy is an organizational issue often appreciated by telecommuters with regard to supervision, which seems to be less appreciated (Alves Cachapela, 2016). He also stipulates that trust should continue to be highlighted as a managerial issue that seems to be an additional and effective means of control. Other authors have attempted to conceive control as a tool reinforced by the development of ICTs (Pontier, 2014; Taskin and Tremblay, 2010; Taskin and Vendramin, 2004).

Similarly, the study inspired by Fairweather (1999, cited in Taskin, 2006), highlights that ICTs aim to guarantee a healthy contact between hierarchy and employees, as well as to mask the physical distance established by telecommuting. Control by results represents a major challenge for managers (Nilles, 1998). Indeed, defining achievable objectives for employees without underestimating their capabilities can be a complex task. Moreover, divergences between individual and collective objectives can generate tensions and conflicts. Therefore, we propose our third hypothesis: H3: Remote control has ambiguous impacts on the satisfaction of virtual teams, as it can be perceived as a limitation of autonomy and flexibility, but also as a factor of motivation and performance.

2.5. Remote Communication

Remote communication refers to the idea of communicating virtually without being physically present, using information and communication technologies to accomplish knowledge sharing in a more effective and efficient manner. The development of remote communication has reduced the contact and exchange of information to be easy and flexible between entities separated at the spatial level, but also at the organizational level. Indeed, without these techniques and tools of remote communication, virtual teams could be unable to create an entity and weave links between them (Barthe, 2001).

According to Smeltzer (2020), remote communication is an essential and crucial component of human interaction to establish links, exchange information, maintain relationships, and promote initiative and autonomy. A challenge that Smeltzer (2020) tends to classify communication media according to their richness. Indeed, these communication media are accompanied by many significant perceptions by individuals. Some opt for face-to-face communication with a direct exchange mode or by phone for what regards electronic communication. While others prefer the medium adapted to their needs, using emails, faxes, and phone calls for information accessibility and better decision-making, which allows for a major and crucial effect on performance and problem-solving. For Rolland, face-to-face meetings can contribute to initiative and the creation of new ideas and management technologies (Rolland, 2010). Becheikh and Su (2005) assert that the performance obtained will be superior when one chooses a medium adapted to the needs of the task. These authors agree on the importance of the richness created by the communication medium, which is relative to the context treated and the mutual relationships between collaborators. In parallel, this remote communication remains ineffective in terms of treating the social spirit of the interlocutors: their reactions, facial expressions, gestures that could be present in face-to-face communication are obscured at a distance (Dubé and Paré, 1999; Čudanov et al., 2009; Janićijević, 2015). Despite the change and crucial development of virtual exchange tools, traditional modes related to face-to-face discussions, phones, and mail remain undeniable (Prasad, 2009). This allows us to formulate our last hypothesis:

H4: Remote leadership has a positive impact on the quality of remote communication, particularly in conflict resolution and problem-solving.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Positioning of the Empirical Study

Our research consists of analyzing and understanding in depth the various challenges related to managing a virtual team using a qualitative study following an interpretivist logic, given that our subject is distinguished by its extremely pragmatic nature and its data comes more from the practical domain than from the literature. This choice was validated by a case study of a Moroccan company that has adopted telework since 2014, it supports clients who are based mainly in Canada, the United States, as well as Morocco in their digital transformation, and meets their needs: web development and mobile development. This paradigm also gives us the opportunity to grasp all the relationships between the actors through their discourse and interactions.

3.2 Description of the Empirical Study

We chose a single case study to further explore the problem studied. This technique highlights the context and nature of the organizational changes identified, the experiences lived by the stakeholders involved, as well as the advantages and constraints to anticipate (Yin, 2014; Wacheux, 1996). With the support of this option, it was possible to use various data collection tools to better understand the pre-established conceptual framework. Our approach remains focused on discovery rather than proof, in order to grasp the regulatory processes generated by remote leadership practices. Our exploratory research study aims at the following objectives:

- Highlight the importance of leadership in the management process and the impact of distance.
- Prevent the risks and challenges of distance.

- Apply best practices in management to exercise leadership at a distance.

Table 1: Summary of Interviewees who Participated in the Qualitative Study.

Categories	Gender	Age(year)	Expérience (year)	Duration(min)	Code
Leaders	<i>M</i>	38	7	40	L01
	<i>F</i>	44	12	55	L02
	<i>M</i>	32	8	43	L03
	<i>M</i>	45	14	40	L04
	<i>M</i>	40	13	50	L05
	<i>F</i>	30	6	38	L06
	<i>M</i>	35	10	50	L07
	<i>F</i>	56	21	56	L08
Collaborators	<i>M</i>	37	5	40	C01
	<i>M</i>	30	4	38	C02
	<i>M</i>	26	2	28	C03
	<i>M</i>	29	6	33	C04
	<i>F</i>	42	12	40	C05
	<i>F</i>	39	5	33	C06
	<i>M</i>	25	2	30	C07
	<i>F</i>	51	13	40	C08
	<i>M</i>	31	3	33	C09
	<i>M</i>	26	2	30	C10
	<i>F</i>	37	5	36	C11
	<i>M</i>	40	5	43	C12

Source: Created by the authors

To better define our research problem, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders (including managers) and collaborators who work remotely from home. In total, we carried out 20 interviews, comprising 8 with leaders in various management positions and 10 with collaborators, totaling 800 minutes, or approximately 40 minutes per interview. The respondents were selected based on their role and experience in the remote work environment, ensuring a diverse range of profiles and perspectives. We gathered insights from leaders supervising virtual teams of 5 to 20 people, holding positions such as project supervisors, operations directors, and unit heads. By interviewing both men and women, we identified convergences and divergences in the perceptions and experiences of leaders and collaborators in remote work settings. These interviews aimed to explore the following themes: leadership perception, remote management challenges, leader intervention in successful control, and the impact of communication on remote team performance. By examining these themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by remote leadership and identify effective strategies and practices to ensure the success of virtual teams.

3.3. Data Analysis Tools

After collecting the data, we transcribed the interviews collected by the research authors. The audio recordings were listened to carefully and the words were transcribed verbatim into a Word file. This step took approximately 4 weeks for the 20 collected interviews. Then, we proceeded to qualitative data analysis using the thematic analysis method. This qualitative research approach "consists of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the emerging themes and sub-themes from the collected data, in order to better understand the phenomena studied". However, the analysis was conducted manually, which allowed us to have a better understanding of the data, greater flexibility in analysis, and the possibility of detecting nuances and details that

might be missed by computer tools. Furthermore, manual analysis enables a more in-depth and nuanced approach, which can be particularly useful for projects that require a deep understanding of the data. The selected information was classified into coherent paragraphs, each grouping responses with a common objective. For each paragraph, we conducted a critical and comparative study with theoretical notions related to the subject, in order to carry out in-depth analyses and interpretations. Similarly, we did not perform general coding for all interviewees. We conducted selective coding, only for those who added additional information, as it appeared that some leaders and collaborators shared the same ideas. Therefore, in some paragraphs, we presented the information in a concise and global manner, avoiding repetitions and highlighting key points.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The initial section of our findings underscores the significance of leadership as perceived by our interviewees within a global context. This part presents the perspectives of both leaders and collaborators regarding the role of leadership in remote work settings, and illustrates how they perceive the impact of leadership on the performance and productivity of virtual teams. The subsequent section of our findings exposes the challenges and risks associated with the practice of remote leadership. This part scrutinizes the obstacles and difficulties that leaders and collaborators face when working remotely, and demonstrates how these challenges can influence the quality of leadership and the performance of virtual teams.

➤ Remote Leadership: Perception of Remote Leadership

At the beginning of our interview, we asked an open-ended question to all interviewees to understand what leadership represents in the remote management process. We asked them to share their perceptions and experiences on the role of leadership in the remote work environment to better understand how they perceive the impact of leadership on the performance and productivity of virtual teams. All the managers we interviewed shared a similar vision of leadership, stating that: "The terms leader, manager, and innovator are almost synonymous. According to them, these concepts are closely linked, as they all involve leading, organizing, and creating a sense of belonging within a collaborative remote team." The managers emphasized that "the role of a leader is to create a collaborative and inclusive work environment, where team members feel engaged and motivated to produce high-quality work remotely." They also highlighted the importance of innovation and creativity in finding effective solutions to the challenges posed by remote work. Indeed, whether in person or remotely, the fundamental needs of collaborators - the need for meaning, recognition, belonging, and appreciation - are essential elements for employee motivation and satisfaction. However, with geographical distance, these needs are amplified, requiring adapted and strengthened leadership. Effective remote leadership involves greater rigor in maintaining managerial rituals, such as regular meetings, individual exchanges, and constructive feedback. It involves being even more attentive to the needs and concerns of collaborators and transmitting more energy and motivation in interactions.

In the same vein, a good remote leader must be able to create a virtual work environment that is inclusive, collaborative, and stimulating. They must be able to communicate clearly and effectively, define clear objectives and expectations, and provide the necessary resources and tools for collaborators to succeed. On the other hand, collaborators perceive leadership as an essential function for their professional success and satisfaction. According to them, remote leadership is: "The art of interacting with others despite the distance to try to progress together

towards a common goal." This means that collaborators expect their leader to be able to create a strong bond with them, even if physical distance separates them.

Another collaborator states: "The most important thing for us is to ask what we have already done, rather than wondering what we should do. It's interesting to see that we have moved from a territorial logic to a logic of collaboration between humans and machines, where systems will optimize the main managerial acts" (code C10). A final collaborator adds: "A leader has a role of animating the team, that is to say, they know how to create a link with each collaborator, make sure they have links between them, and make sure there is a link throughout the team, with perhaps a project that brings everyone together" (code C05).

Collaborators also emphasize the importance of the one-to-one relationship between the leader and team members, which can take place both in the workplace and in their homes. This implies that the leader must be able to create a virtual workspace that is healthy and collaborative, where team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns.

They also consider that "the managerial act is an act that must be carried out at the end of the day, in the form of feedback." This means that the leader must be able to provide constructive and regular feedback to help team members improve their performance and achieve their goals. Collaborators expect their leader to be a coach and mentor, who helps them progress and grow professionally. Ultimately, leaders and collaborators support the idea that the world of work has changed significantly, moving from a physical environment to a virtual environment where reflection and remote collaboration have become the norm. This evolution is reflected in the managerial acts and leadership techniques put in place to optimize and encourage work in virtual environments.

➤ **Remote Management: The Relationship between the Manager and the Leader**

Managers and leaders share a common goal: to inspire their teams to stand out and achieve the set results. However, their approaches differ in terms of how to achieve this goal. Managers focus primarily on the operational aspects of the process, ensuring that tasks are accomplished efficiently and effectively. They focus on planning, organizing, and controlling activities to achieve organizational objectives. In contrast, leaders adopt a more encouraging and empowering approach, seeking to inspire and motivate their teams to reach their full potential and feel responsible for their results. Leaders create a work environment that fosters creativity, innovation, and risk-taking, and encourages individuals to take initiatives and develop their skills.

Manager's Perspective:

Remote management is likely the situation that allows for the implementation of best practices, whether it's organization or management. Trust and autonomy are now essential and crucial elements in this context. Indeed, the majority of remote managers (75%) attest that they trust their team members and give them a certain autonomy in accomplishing their tasks. One of the managers interviewed stated: "I would say that, in remote work, remote management or leadership, just like in real life, the importance lies in the trust we give to collaborators, to the people we work with. It's essential to give them our full trust, hope, and optimism, while basing it on resource responsibility" (code L10). In other words, this manager emphasizes the importance of trust and autonomy in remote management. "It's essential to trust collaborators and give them the means to make decisions and solve problems autonomously." This creates a positive and productive work environment, where collaborators feel valued and responsible for their results.

Another manager expressed that for him: "The first rule to have regarding remote management is to understand that 'out of sight, out of mind' is not an excuse for not managing collaborators effectively. On the contrary, the principle is to manage, direct, and produce the expected performance, while contributing to the development and accompaniment of our collaborators" (code L01). This means that remote managers must find ways to motivate and encourage their collaborators to make decisions autonomously, without needing to see them or be in direct contact with them. This requires stimulating their sense of autonomy and trust, by giving them the necessary tools and resources to succeed in their role.

Collaborator's Perspective:

Working remotely can be a challenge for collaborators, particularly due to the absence of a manager who plays a role of channeling in the remote ecosystem. Indeed, 56% of collaborators state that remote work can be difficult due to the lack of direction and direct supervision. One collaborator expresses his opinion with great sincerity: "For me, autonomy and trust are the major stakes of remote work. I feel completely free to work independently, to perform my tasks, and to make my decisions without needing constant supervision, which allows me to take initiatives, solve problems, and find solutions autonomously." "How could I not be satisfied with my situation, when I have the possibility to organize my professional and personal life autonomously, thanks to information and communication technologies, I am able to stay connected to my company and work effectively, even if I'm not physically present" (code C09).

The rest of the respondents (44%) believe that "it's essential to have a manager by your side for support and guidance, because remotely, some managers ask for an exhaustive and precise account of daily tasks performed, which can be a waste of time, even counterproductive, and could be interpreted as a lack of trust." We noticed that this increased supervision remotely can be counterproductive and harm the quality of work, prevent interpersonal relationships, and hinder the fulfillment of collaborators. It's essential to note that autonomy is a key element for the fulfillment of collaborators, as it allows them to make decisions and work independently. However, when managers demand detailed reports and increased supervision, it can create a sense of control and lack of trust, which can harm autonomy and collaborator fulfillment.

➤ Remote Control: From Supervision to Control

Leader's Perspective:

In remote leadership, the absence of direct supervision requires the presence of control, especially with the demands of work, which encourages leaders to reconsider their supervision methods to control actions from their location using remote management platforms such as TeamViewer, AnyDesk, LogMeIn, Splashtop, and RemotePC. There is a divergence of opinions among leaders regarding control and monitoring in remote work, which reflects a distortion between applicable rules and collaborators' aspirations. This is reflected in the discourse of superiors: "The geographical remoteness of work also carries major risks in terms of management and control, as it becomes complex to identify problems sufficiently in advance. Because we're not always aware of our collaborators' weaknesses, but we always try to intervene in actions, one of our first actions was to stop clocking for all collaborators, based on trust and total freedom. We try to let them organize themselves as they wish. Personally, I know

how to manage, guide, and orient, and I no longer rely on control. However, I monitor progress in terms of tasks and achievements."

Another leader states: "In fact, collaborators always seek to prove their added value to the company, which is a true element to consider when managing remotely. Our role as leaders is to be confident and curious in working to be performant and to facilitate the path for our collaborators." Moreover, "curiosity, because we're not able to visualize everything that happens around our collaborators, the first job is to ask several questions to understand what's happening around them, to know what seems easy and what seems difficult for them, to have this true curiosity and empathy to show them that we're here to help, guide, and control them in a positive and constructive way" (code LO2).

Collaborator's Perspective:

From the collaborators' side, we generally note that there are many opinions (60%) supporting the fact that trust does not exclude control: "We are in favor of control, as long as it aims to identify dysfunctions, prevent errors, and improve the quality of our operations." "Control is an essential and inevitable step, but it must be used constructively to examine areas that require particular attention, reduce the possibility of failure, and improve processes, rather than criticizing collaborators or accusing them of lack of competence." The rest (40%) think that control leads to a significant increase in stress and fear a negative effect on their morale.

One of the collaborators interviewed attests: "I want to have total autonomy in performing my tasks, without being controlled or monitored at every moment. I want to be free to make decisions and work independently, without having to justify every action and every movement. In return, I'm willing to assume the consequences of my actions and take responsibility for my mistakes if I make any" (code C16). In the same vein, another declares: "I often feel a high level of stress when I'm under close supervision, which can lead to errors in my work. Moreover, his behavior seems to me that I'm not considered a trustworthy professional and that I constantly need his intervention to accomplish my tasks. This gives me the impression that I'm not able to make decisions or work autonomously, which demotivates me and makes me doubt my abilities" (code C03).

From these testimonies, we can deduce that leaders and collaborators share a common vision on the importance of control in its positive context, specifically as an essential asset that aims to improve quality and performance rather than monitoring individuals. Indeed, the hierarchical relationship at a distance relies on a subtle balance between control and trust.

➤ Remote Communication: Communication as a Key Factor in Leadership

Leader's Perspective:

Communication is a key factor in success in a virtual environment, promoting transparency and clarity of exchanges, in which leaders play an essential role in creating communication channels to guide their teams. According to them, effective communication is open, regular, and allows for maintaining cohesion, resolving problems quickly, and strengthening the sense of belonging to the team, even at a distance. One of our interviewed leaders affirms that: "Today, with hindsight, we take the time to reflect and conduct our actions in a strategic manner. We analyze the advantages and disadvantages of our approaches, implementing a structured methodology to maximize benefits and minimize risks. This is possible thanks to active and collaborative communication, where we work together as teams to move towards our objectives. Our priority is not to leave anyone behind and to ensure that all collaborators are involved and engaged in the process" (code L07). We deduce from this that leaders have placed communication at the

center of their strategic vision, which means they consider it an essential tool for achieving objectives and succeeding in their remote management.

In parallel, there is a vision proposed by another leader who explains that: "We ensure that we take into account the comfort and needs of our collaborators, which is essential for maintaining a positive and productive work environment. For example, if I plan a video conference for 10:00 AM, I make sure to open it at 9:50 AM to allow all participants to connect and prepare. Similarly, if I plan to end the video conference at 11:00 AM, I start concluding the session at 10:55 AM to respect our collaborators' time and allow them to manage their next tasks without delay" (code L03). This reveals that leaders remain in contact with their employees and also ensure they have enough time to reorganize and continue their work efficiently.

Therefore, for leadership to be exercised effectively, managers must abandon their idealized vision and focus on the reality on the ground, presenting communication challenges encountered at a distance in a transparent manner, involving their teams in finding solutions to overcome obstacles and improve communication and collaboration remotely. Indeed, in a similar sense, an interviewed leader seems to think that: "Remote communication is a complex challenge that presents several difficulties. First, the understanding of information by collaborators can be an obstacle, which forces me to repeat information several times to ensure it is well understood. Then, I always find myself obliged to explain things over the phone, and collaborators wait for confirmation by email to confirm their understanding of the information, which leads to repetition of tasks and slows down the execution of the process" (code L02).

Collaborators' Perspective

Collaborators also highlight the linguistic obstacles they encounter at a distance, with a proportion of them (70%) experiencing difficulties understanding their supervisor during phone calls, which hinders the creation of a trust bond. One of the interviewees expresses that: "When I'm discussing with my manager over the phone, I sometimes encounter difficulties understanding what he means. I'm not sure if it's due to the complexity of his vocabulary or the difference in our communication style. Indeed, I hesitate to ask him to repeat what he said, as I fear it might make him angry and create tension in our relationship" (code C18).

However, for the remaining 30%, it is common for collaborators to systematically ask their manager to confirm points discussed via email. The majority of them feel uncomfortable in this situation and declare: "Working remotely is no longer easy, and we often encounter difficulties. When we're away from our superiors and colleagues, it can be challenging to ask for their opinions and advice interactively. That's why it's natural to request additional information, such as confirmation of details, to help us work remotely effectively and responsibly, and avoid negative consequences that could arise from our actions."

It's clear that communication between remote workers and supervisors must be balanced and based on a mutual, interactive relationship, without excess or defect, which respects the comfort of managers and the needs of collaborators.

4.2 Discussions

➤ The Perception of Remote Leadership Influences the Performance of Virtual Teams

Our results reveal that leaders and collaborators share the same opinion on the importance of leadership in virtual teams. Indeed, leadership in virtual teams is a process of mutual influence

that requires a constant oscillation between a directive role and a supportive role. Leaders must both ensure the completion of tasks and facilitate good relationships, cohesion, and trust within the team (Liao, 2017; Lim, 2018; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Eseryel et al., 2020; Kohntopp and McCann, 2020). In addition, leaders must take care of the needs, preferences, and well-being of team members. Through close interactions with team members, leaders can establish trust relationships to overcome the negative effects of virtuality and lack of direct supervision (Liao, 2017; Lim, 2018; Opdenakker and Cuypers, 2019).

Our results are consistent with those of the study conducted by Ali El Idrissi and Mohamed Frouka in their article "Performance in virtual teams: a quantitative study with PLS-SEM". Despite different methodological approaches (qualitative vs. quantitative), we find that both studies highlight the crucial importance of leadership to ensure the success of virtual teams. Leaders play a key role in providing guidance, allocating resources, helping to solve problems, and controlling performance. In addition, they must develop and evolve norms and behavioral patterns within their teams, while playing a social role to strengthen cohesion and trust within the team.

➤ **Remote Management and Leadership: An Integrated Approach**

Although management and leadership are closely linked, they have fundamental differences. While a manager directs a group by virtue of their status, a leader inspires and motivates their team through their aura and skills. Our study highlights the importance of these differences and emphasizes that leadership is not an official title, but rather a set of attitudes and skills. Indeed, high-level skills and abilities, such as positive attitude, autonomy, initiative, and responsibility, are predictors of individual performance (Glikson et al., 2019; Belova and Mezhevov, 2020).

In this context, the manager who wants to become a leader must focus on developing these skills and abilities in their collaborators, rather than simply exercising their authority by virtue of their status. Individuals with a high level of social competence are also more likely to develop awareness of disclosure in their interactions (Antheunis et al., 2012; Lim, 2018; Enrique and Joel, 2020).

Our results are consistent with those of Mohamed Ali Hedhili and Samia Boudabous, who emphasized in their article "Remote management: what challenges for managers and managed" the importance of the manager's role in building visions and supporting their collaborators. The key factors for effective remote management are trust, autonomy, and responsibility, which allow collaborators to develop autonomy and make informed decisions. This consistency with existing literature strengthens the credibility of our results.

➤ **The Role of Remote Control in Team Supervision by Leaders**

Our results reveal a certain confusion between the way collaborators and leaders perceive control. For leaders, control is a constructive step to avoid failure and guarantee performance. In contrast, collaborators perceive control positively when it aims to validate and verify tasks, particularly when control is accompanied by direct feedback that can address their mistakes or weaknesses. However, collaborators perceive control negatively when it is used to prove their incompetence or when it is perceived as a threat to performance. It seems that leaders and collaborators have different perspectives on control, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. It is essential to clarify the objectives and modalities of control to avoid these problems.

The results of our study contradict those of Garton and Wegryn (2006), who found that control is an essential component of the traditional logic of work. According to this logic, the manager is responsible for supervising their subordinates to ensure that tasks are carried out in

accordance with established procedures and that paid hours correspond to work done. In this approach, the manager has the power to reward or punish their subordinates to encourage them to respect procedures and productivity standards. Although this approach has evolved over time, it remains present in many organizations and influences the practices of many managers. It seems that our results challenge this traditional approach to control and suggest that managers should adopt a more nuanced and collaborative approach to motivate and supervise their subordinates.

➤ **Remote Communication in Virtual Teams: A Study on Leaders' Practices**

Our results show that effective remote communication requires constant efforts and continuous adaptation. It is essential to regularly evaluate what works and what can be improved, and to be open to trying new strategies to enhance collaboration and understanding. To achieve this, leaders have a key role to play in maintaining a close link with their collaborators, which allows them to stay informed about the team's news and needs. Additionally, they must choose the right communication tools for their teams and establish clear guidelines for the use of each communication tool.

This study is largely compatible with the one conducted by Sanusi, Ola, and Adaramola (2023) entitled "Communication Challenges and Strategies in Remote Work Settings". Both studies share similar findings, particularly the respondents' satisfaction with the effectiveness of current tools for remote collaboration, as well as the communication challenges faced by remote workers, such as the absence of nonverbal cues, information overload, and misunderstandings. The convergent findings highlight the importance of taking into account the specific communication challenges of remote work environments.

4.3 Recommendations

The results of this study have significant implications for organizations seeking to effectively manage virtual teams. Leaders must be aware of the impact of their personality traits and gender on trust and team engagement and take steps to mitigate negative effects. In addition, organizations should invest in training and support for virtual teams to help them overcome the challenges of remote work and promote trust and engagement among team members.

To further explore this topic, it would be useful to examine additional variables that can influence the trust and faith that team members have in their leader, as well as the characteristics that can affect team members' behaviors. It would also be interesting to study the role of a leader's character in analyzing the relationship between nature and trust.

Other potential research avenues could include:

- Exploring new ways to strengthen relationships between team members and contributing to the study of effective team management by leaders.
- Expanding the catalog of factors that can affect the performance of virtual teams, taking into account both leaders and team members.
- Examining the effect of cultural differences on the relationship between personality and trust in teams working remotely.

5. Conclusion :

The main objective of our study is to examine and evaluate the impact of leadership on the management and satisfaction of a virtual team, as well as the challenges related to its engagement. To achieve this objective, we conducted an in-depth case analysis in a Moroccan company, based on 20 semi-structured interviews with virtual team members. This approach allowed us to collect rich and detailed qualitative data on team members' perceptions and experiences of leadership and virtual management.

Our previous results showed that virtual leadership has a positive impact on team members' satisfaction, particularly when it is based on involvement and engagement of collaborators, as well as listening to their opinions, judgments, and suggestions for improving practices. To achieve this, it is essential to identify good practices to retain, areas for improvement, and tools to use to reach objectives. By promoting open communication and creating a collaborative and dynamic work environment, leaders can value and involve each team member in collective success.

However, it is important to note that leadership can be perceived in different ways by individuals, and leadership styles can vary from one person to another. This can lead to misunderstandings or discord within an organization, particularly in terms of leadership exercise. To avoid these problems, it is essential to identify gaps and take into account individual differences to create a harmonious and effective work environment.

This study has some limitations, including the limited sample size, which may compromise the external validity of the findings. To overcome this limitation, it would be useful to conduct a similar survey on a larger and more representative sample, which would strengthen the generalizability of the results.

The second limitation is related to the methodology, as the use of this approach depends on the nature of the problem and the objectives of the study. Since the preferred approach is qualitative, the analysis of results is based on clearly established criteria, and the researcher's contribution is also taken into account. This means that the analysis of results can vary depending on the approach adopted by researchers.

The third limitation of this research is that it did not implement a longitudinal approach, which means that the data was collected at a specific point in time and does not allow for tracking the evolution of the phenomena studied over time.

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