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TEAM LEADERS' SKILLS – FINDINGS FROM THE IT SECTOR

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ABSTRACT:

THE WORK OF TEAM LEADERS IS A COMPLEX ONE, INVOLVING A HIGH DEGREE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND A SUSTAINED EFFORT TO ACHIEVE THE ASSUMED OBJECTIVES. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH IS TO IDENTIFY THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS OF A SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADER. THE ADDED VALUE OF THIS STUDY IS GIVEN BY THE PRACTICAL PART, WHICH HAS TWO RESEARCH OBJECTIVES: (1) TO IDENTIFY THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS AT THE LEVEL OF A SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADER SUITABLE FOR BOTH TEAM LEADERS AND TEAM MEMBERS, ALONG WITH (2) TO ANALYZE THE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SKILLS DESIRED BY BOTH PARTIES (TEAM LEADERS RESPECTIVELY TEAM MEMBERS). THE RESEARCH METHOD USED IS A QUANTITATIVE ONE, THE OPINION POLL BEING CONDUCTED AT THE LEVEL OF EMPLOYEES OF AN IT COMPANY. IN ORDER TO COLLECT PRIMARY DATA, A QUESTIONNAIRE WAS LAUNCHED, THE SAMPLE BEING MADE UP OF EMPLOYEES WHO WORK IN TEAMS, WHETHER THEY ARE TEAM LEADERS OR JUST TEAM MEMBERS. THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCLUSIONS INDICATE THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT HARD SKILLS FOR A SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADER ARE UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS PROCESS, UNDERSTANDING DATA SECURITY AND HAVING TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE MOST IMPORTANT SOFT SKILLS FOR A SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADER ARE COMMUNICATION SKILLS, ADAPTABILITY, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, TASK DELEGATION AND TIME MANAGEMENT. AT THE LEVEL OF THE STUDIED SAMPLE, THE OPINION OF TEAM LEADERS COINCIDES WITH THE OPINION OF TEAM MEMBERS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT HARD SKILLS OF A SUCCESSFUL MANAGER, RESPECTIVELY COINCIDES ONLY PARTIALLY IN THE CASE OF SOFT SKILLS OF A SUCCESSFUL TEAM MANAGER.

KEY WORDS: TEAMS, TEAM LEADERS, SKILLS, IT SECTOR

INTRODUCTION

In a dynamic and competitive context, where collaboration efficiency and team coordination are becoming increasingly vital, the team leader takes a central position in ensuring their success and performance. Through his/her skills, the team leader is able to align and lead the team towards achieving the goals of the organization. The main purpose of this study is to identify the most important skills of a successful team leader. The study

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includes a theoretical part, conducted following a literature review, on the skills needed for a successful team leader. The practical part is based on a quantitative field research, the research method being the opinion poll conducted at the level of employees in an IT company (hereinafter called Company A, for confidentiality reasons). We chose an IT company because it is one of the most dynamic and constantly developing sectors, with a great impact on the labor market and the economy in general. The added value of this study is given by the practical side. The research objectives are: (1) to identify the most important skills at team leader level suitable for both team leaders and team members, along with (2) to analyze the differences and similarities between the skills desired by both parties (team leader and team members). In order to achieve these objectives, a quantitative research method was used, the opinion poll being conducted at the level of employees of an IT company, the primary data being collected with the help of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was launched online and promoted to employees with the help of several online groups. To achieve the research objectives, the questionnaire included two filter questions, to ensure that respondents are part of a team (whether they are team leaders or team members) respectively have a professional experience of at least 6 months. The main conclusions of the applied research conducted are the following: the most important hard skills for a successful team leader are understanding the business process, understanding data security, and having technical knowledge and the most important soft skills for a successful team leader are communication skills, adaptability, emotional intelligence, task delegation and time management. At the level of the studied sample, the opinion of team leaders coincides with the opinion of team members on the most important hard skills of a successful manager, respectively coincides only partially in the case of soft skills of a successful team manager.

TEAM LEADER SKILLS: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Behind any successful organization are people who make a commitment to its mission and who lead other groups of people who work together, having common goals, goals that contribute to the organic development and growth of the organization. One of these people is the team leader. In the literature, as well as among those who work in teams, there is no unitary approach regarding the meaning of the concept of team leader. In this paper we adopt the definition proposed by Lungescu et al [2] according to which "a manager is a leader, a person at the head of others, officially or unofficially (the official leader is called chief). The leader (1) sets the direction in which other people will act, and (2) influences those people, motivating them to follow the established direction. At team level, according to Serrat [2], the team leader is the one who has a basic role in facilitating its success, "with a particular role in bringing the team closer together and building the interpersonal relations its members need to succeed". According to this definition, the team leader contributes to team performance and at the same time attaches great importance to social relationships between team members.

According to Victor Sohmen [3] there are eight essential aspects that facilitate the link between team leader and teamwork, as follows:

- Vision. By involving team members in developing the vision and ensuring constant alignment with the organization's objectives, the leader creates a sense of belonging and empowerment in the team.
- Integrity. This trait energizes trust, respect, and credibility of team members towards the actions the leader takes.
- Communication. The team leader must clearly communicate expectations, objectives, responsibilities, level of performance and ways to provide feedback.

- Collaboration. Successful leaders adapt to each situation and create a supportive environment in which each team member has a well-established role and provides added value.
- Goal orientation. A team leader must consider the objectives of the organization, support them through the objectives of the team members.
- Empowerment. This can happen through effective communication between the team leader and team members to delegate responsibilities to the right people. Mentoring sessions contribute to building positive relationships and, implicitly, to achieving team goals.
- Creativity. By fostering a healthy work environment that encourages innovation, leaders can improve and transform the organization's results to gain a competitive advantage in the market in which the company operates.
- Team building. The team leader has a significant role in defining the organizational climate. The team must be developed in a way that promotes a positive team-building culture.

The epidemic and lockdown period of 2020 led many companies in the public and private sectors to adopt remote work. This context required the use of digital technologies, which played a crucial role in transforming leadership and creating new ways of communication and virtual collaboration between team leaders and team members. As a result of this transformation, the concept of E-leader or E-leadership [4] appeared, which marked the way leaders and team members relate to each other within the organizations they are part of. E-leaders had to complete their skill set to manage various communication platforms and adapt to new requirements. Working in the online environment has had and still has a negative impact on the psychological health (but also on the physical one) of employees, and "soft skills", such as emotional intelligence have become crucial for leading teams in the online environment.

Regarding the qualities, abilities and behavior of a team leader, the perspective of colleagues in the team, of those who are led by him/her is an important one. In a well-reasoned study, Lyons [5] highlighted the importance of involving team members in identifying and specifying critical behaviors of team leaders, which supports team members' performance.

According to Maria Johnson, enthusiasm and passion and resistance to pressure are two qualities of a team leader that are appreciated by team members [6]. Enthusiasm and passion have a significant impact on her team and customers. They are contagious, they have the ability to attract people to the leader and encourage them to participate actively. Moreover, during difficult times, enthusiasm and passion become even more important by providing the energy and determination needed to overcome obstacles and maintain a sense of direction and purpose within the team in terms of resistance to pressure, both in personal and professional life people have to face various challenges. According to the quoted author, it is essential that the response to these challenges be one of which they are proud, which involves maintaining integrity. According to human resources specialists [7], employees appreciate in their leaders the courage to admit when they make mistakes or when they do not have an answer to the situation / question, respectively the recognition and appreciation shown to them. By honestly and openly admitting mistakes, a leader builds trust and fosters an environment where all team members can learn and grow. In addition, when the leader does not have the necessary answers to existing questions/situations, acknowledging this aspect and showing the efforts made to obtain the necessary information provides a positive

example for the whole team. Recognition and appreciation towards team members falls into the category of motivating factors for employees and contributes to strengthening their trust and satisfaction in the company. By providing positive feedback, expressing appreciation, and giving tangible rewards, a leader can inspire employees to push their limits to achieve outstanding performance. According to Maria Tanski-Phillips [8], employees want (need) a leader who is characterized by less micromanagement, recognition, and appreciation, caring, listening to employees, honest feedback, clear communication and offering challenges to those they work with. We note that in the above, employees referred strictly to soft skills of their leaders, skills that are obtained over time and which involve both a series of personal qualities and direct involvement in leading people, in the most diverse situations – in other words, experience in leading teams and companies.

In the field of software development, teams often have a different way of working compared to so-called classic teams, and this results from the unique nature of software development projects. Thus, they require flexibility, adaptability, and rapid iteration to meet evolving customer needs. (Iteration is the repetition of a process in a computer program for multiple blocks of data to be processed in order.) As a result, software teams use various methodologies specifically tailored to the software development lifecycle to optimize their processes and deliver high-quality, efficient software [9]. The Software Development Lifecycle (SDLC) is a process of building or maintaining software systems that includes various phases, from preliminary development analysis to software testing and evaluation in post-development. SDLC also consists of models and methodologies that development teams use to develop software systems, these methodologies forming the framework for planning and controlling the entire development process [10].

At the level of teams within IT companies, the following elements meet:

- When it comes to decision-making, one of the essential features is collaboration. Team members contribute and share feedback, and together they reach consensus in decision-making [11].
- In terms of project management, software development teams often use agile methodologies, such as Scrum or Kanban, which involve collaborative and iterative project management. This means that team members share responsibility for planning, developing, and testing the project and are constantly looking for feedback from users. to improve the product.
- In the case of tools and technologies, software development teams often use online collaboration tools such as source code management (GitHub), task management, and communication platforms. These tools enable more efficient collaboration and more accurate tracking of project progress [12].
- In terms of practices, it is common for software development teams to use software development practices such as automated testing, continuous integration, and continuous delivery. These practices enable faster development and more frequent delivery of functionalities to users, and user feedback can be quickly integrated into the development process [13].
- At the communication level, software development teams that have adopted one of the Agile technologies use face-to-face communication, whiteboards – physical and online, *pair programming and pair programming remotely* [14].

THE SKILLS OF A TEAM LEADER: THE PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

The applied part of this study is conducted at the level of Company A's employees. The perspective of employees who are team members (regardless of whether they are team leaders or team members) regarding the skills of a successful team leader is analyzed.

The research objectives of the practical part of this study are: (1) to identify the most important skills at the level of team leaders according to both team leaders and team members; (2) analyze the differences and similarities between the skills mentioned by team leaders and team members.

In order to achieve the two research objectives, a quantitative research was carried out, more precisely an opinion poll at the level of employees of Company A, which activates in the IT field. The data collection tool was the questionnaire, which was launched online using Google Forms, between 20.05.2023 and 10.06.2023. The questionnaire was promoted on a Facebook group at Company A level located in Cluj-Napoca, so any employee could fill in the questionnaire online. The questionnaire included 2 filter questions, one regarding team membership and the other regarding work experience, the requirement being to be at least 6 months. We chose these filter questions to ensure that respondents fit the profile of respondents who can provide relevant information on the skills a good team leader has/should have. More specifically, that respondents are part of a team and have had enough time to familiarize themselves with what a job entails.

The questionnaire included a number of 11 mandatory questions, of which 9 closed questions (one part of the Likert Scale). The 2 open questions aimed to collect in-depth data, highly relevant for research. The questions in the questionnaire can be divided into three sections, as follows: (1) the first two questions were filter questions, (2) the following four questions aimed to identify the respondents' perspective on hard and soft skills for a successful team leader, (3) the last five questions were questions about the respondents' profile, the aspects being the position occupied: team leader or team member, role / position occupied (Software Developer, UI / UX Designer, Scrum Master, DevOps Engineer, Project Manager, Business Analyst, Software Tester / QA Engineer, Solution Architect, Security Tester / Engineer etc.), professional seniority, type of team (hybrid, remote or onsite) and respectively the size of the team to which it belongs.

The questionnaire was pretested on two employees of Company A, based in Cluj-Napoca. Following the feedback received, small changes were made to some questions in the questionnaire.

Company A operates in the UK, Romania, and Moldova. It provides cloud transformation, software engineering, technology consulting and test automation services. Company A also provides application development and management, digital media, infrastructure management and cloud services. A's main clients include a major European financial services group, a global consulting firm and a recognized online marketing company.

At the end of the questionnaire launch period, 30 valid responses were received. As the number of employees in Company A to which the questionnaire was addressed was 1000 employees, we note that the response rate was 3%. We appreciate that this low response rate has several causes, namely: the large workload of employees and as a result the reduced time allocated to other activities (such as filling in such a questionnaire), the large number of questionnaires that are launched in the company (both by the company's internal departments and as a result of various collaborations, like this - for example) as well as the low interest of employees to provide information. As a result, the sample of the present research is 30 employees.

Below we present the profile of the participants in the survey conducted within Company A.

Relative to the quality of team member or team leader, respondents who are team members predominated (63.6%), as expected to happen because in any company employees who are team members predominate compared to those who are team leaders.

In relation to professional seniority, 15 respondents (50% of the sample) mentioned more than 5 years of service and 13 respondents (43.33% of the sample) mentioned 1-5 years of service. We note a small percentage of respondents with less than one year of professional experience. This can be explained by the existence of one of the filter questions (the requirement being to have worked for at least 6 months in the IT field) respectively by the situation of Company A, one of the most successful companies in the field that attracts employees with experience in the IT field.

Regarding the type of team, they are part of, most respondents (53.3%) work in teams that work in a hybrid work system, and another large part of the sample (46.7%) works in teams that work in a full remote system. This situation is in line with the current situation regarding the functioning of IT companies, the vast majority of employees opting for remote work (in whole or in part), this field occupying the 1st place in *The top industry for remote workers in 2023*, according to the well-known Forbes magazine [15].

Relative to the size of the team they are part of/lead, most respondents (43.3% of the sample) work in teams with less than 10 members, followed by those (40% of the sample) who work in teams of 10 and 15 members, while the rest of respondents work in teams with more than 15 members.

Regarding the role occupied in the team, respondents predominate (63.3% of the sample) occupying the role of Software Developers, with the observation that among them there are employees who simultaneously fulfill several roles, such as Product Owner, Scrum Master, Software Architect, Design Lead or Career Coach. The other respondents occupy only one role, such as UX/UI Designer, DevOps Engineer, Delivery Manager or Automation Lead.

After describing the profile of the participants in the survey conducted among employees working in teams within Company A, proceed to the presentation of the analysis of the collected data, the sample being 30 employees.

	Team leaders' answers					Team members answers				
	Not important at all	Of little importance	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not important at all	Of little importance	Quite important	Very important	Essential
Professional certifications	3	6	1	1	0	3	7	6	3	0
Technical knowledge	0	0	2	3	6	0	2	4	8	5
Understanding data security	0	0	2	4	5	1	2	1	10	5
Knowledge of related ceremonies	0	1	2	4	4	0	2	9	4	4
Understanding the business process	0	0	1	7	3	0	2	2	6	9

Establishing and interpreting KPIs	0	1	3	5	2	0	2	6	8	2
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Table 1. Distribution of respondents by answers to the question *How important is it for you as a team leader to have the following hard skills?*

The first aspect presented below has as subject the perspective of team leaders and team members on the importance of a set of hard skills, identified as important for a successful team leader, according to the specialized literature. Analyzing the answers received (see Table 1) we notice the following:

- a) The top 3 hard skills for a successful team leader are understanding the business process, understanding data security, and having technical knowledge. In the case of the first skill, 10 out of 11 team leaders (90.9%) and 15 out of 19 team members (78.94%) chose the answer options Very important and Essential. In the case of understanding the business process, 9 out of 11 team leaders (57.89%) and 15 out of 19 team members (78.94%) chose the answer options Very important and Essential. These answer options were chosen by 9 out of 11 team leaders (57.89%) and 13 out of 19 team members (68.42%) for their technical knowledge. As you can see, the opinion of team leaders largely coincides with the opinion of team members on the most important hard skills of a successful manager, a desirable aspect with a positive impact on the proper functioning of teams.
- b) Of all the skills mentioned in the open-ended question in the Questionnaire, holding professional certifications is the hard skill considered the least important. It received the most responses: Not important and Of little importance, namely 9 out of 11 team leaders (81.81%) and 10 out of 19 team members (52.63%).
- c) Knowledge of related ceremonies is hard skill where the opinion of team leaders does not coincide with the opinion of team members, namely 8 out of 11 team leaders (72.72%) chose the answer options Very important and Essential compared to 8 out of 19 team members (42.10%) who chose the same answer options.

To the open-ended question in the questionnaire "What would be, according to you, 3 skills that a successful team leader should have?", the answers received were extremely varied (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). In these Figures, the size of the circles is given by the frequency of responses received and the colors used have the following meaning: yellow is used for the skill with the most mentions, orange indicates soft abilities, and blue is used for hard abilities. In relation to these answers, we consider the following:

- Communication is the ability with most respondents' options, both from the perspective of team leaders and team members. The fact that the two perspectives coincide indicates both the importance of this skill and a situation that is desirable at the level of a team (the opinion of team leaders coincides with that of team members), with a positive impact on its performance.
- The perspective of team leaders coincides with the perspective of team members in the case of other skills mentioned, namely empathy and adaptability (which are soft skills) and negotiation skills, respectively.



Figure 1. The skills a team leader should have – the perspective of team leaders



Figure 2. The skills that a team leader should have - the perspective of team members

Below we present the perspective of team leaders and team members on the importance of a set of soft skills, identified as important for a successful team leader, according to the literature. Analyzing the answers received (see Table 2) we notice the following:

- a) The top 3 soft skills for a successful team leader are communication skills, adaptability, and emotional intelligence – according to team leaders, respectively communication skills – delegating tasks and time management – according to team members. All team leaders chose the answer options Very important and Essential for the first 2 skills. The same answer options were chosen by 9 out of 11 team leaders, 11 (81.81%) for the emotional intelligence skill. Team members' answers are as follows: the communication skill was chosen by all survey participants (with Very important and Essential answer options), task delegation skill was chosen by 17 out of 19 team leaders (89.47%) and the time management skill was chosen by 15 out of 19 team leaders (78.94%). As you can see, the opinion of the team leaders coincides with the opinion of the team members regarding the skill of communication, otherwise their answers are different.
- b) Of all the skills mentioned in the open-ended question of the Questionnaire, the soft skill considered the least important by team leaders is time management and by team members is creativity. The answer options Not important and Of little importance were chosen by 4 of the 11 team leaders (36.36%) for their time management skills, respectively by 4 out of 19 team members (21.05%) for creativity

	Team leaders' answers					Team members answers				
	Not important at all	Of Little importance	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not important at all	Of little importance	Quite important	Very important	Essential
Creativity	0	1	5	4	2	0	4	9	6	0
Emotional intelligence	0	0	1	4	6	0	0	6	6	7
Communication skills	0	0	0	2	9	0	0	0	4	15
Adaptability	0	0	0	4	7	0	2	9	7	1
Time management	0	4	3	4	0	0	0	4	12	3
Delegation of tasks	0	1	4	5	2	0	0	2	8	9

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by answers to the question *How important is it for you as a team leader to have the following hard skills?*

Starting from the collected data (see Table 1 and Table 2) we refer to the research objectives. Thus, regarding the first research objective, the most important hard skills for a successful team leader are understanding the business process, understanding data security, and having technical knowledge and the most important soft skills for a successful team leader are communication skills, adaptability, emotional intelligence, task delegation and time management. Regarding the second research objective, the opinion of team leaders largely coincides with the opinion of team members on the most important hard skills of a successful manager, and only partially coincides with the soft skills of a successful manager. According to the answers received to the open question "What would be, according to you, 3 skills that a successful team leader should have?" (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), both team leaders and team members indicated communication first, other common skills (mentioned by both team leaders and team members) being empathy, adaptability and negotiation skills.

CONCLUSION

The skills of team leaders is a topic of interest for the management of contemporary companies, where objectives are achieved with the help of teams, respectively for human resources service providers who offer development programs focused on the skills of the team leader. The organizational environment is extremely dynamic, teams also following this trend. Team leaders work in this dynamic organizational context, currently acting in teams operating in remote or hybrid work, the situation encountered primarily in the case of IT companies [15].

The primary research conducted at the level of employees of Company A acting in the IT field, the method used being the opinion poll, leads to the following conclusions.

Among the most important hard skills highlighted by respondents are technical knowledge, understanding business processes and understanding data security, which indicates the need for technical training for a team leader acting in IT teams. In the case of soft skills, those that were mentioned as most important by respondents were communication skills, adaptability and emotional intelligence, skills that are the basis for effective and productive collaboration. The primary research contains responses from both team leaders and team members. When it comes to the hard skills of a successful team leader, the opinions of team leaders largely coincide with those of team members. This gives even greater value to the results of this study. In the case of the soft skills of a successful team leader, communication skills, empathy and adaptability were mentioned by both team leaders and team members.

The results of this study have a practical applicability for human resources specialists who are interested in identifying possible talents among employees in IT companies to involve them in the team leadership program. Also, human resources specialists who define and develop team leadership programs can use the results of this research to substantiate decisions regarding the content of their programs.

The present research also has a number of limitations, as follows. The sample size of applied research is small, 30 employees. The data collection tool can be subject to improvement, starting from a series of interviews with team leader and team members to improve the quality of questions used in collecting raw data. As a result, future research directions are to improve the data collection tool and to conduct new research at the level of larger samples of employees.

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