



Research Article

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## Complex Approach on Multicultural Teams Management & Leadership

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### Abstract

*Culture plays a fundamental role in peoples' perception of the world thus perception of the world and culture has a major impact on one another. Consequently, leadership cannot be effective if diversity of cultures, likewise values, habits, communication style, history, language, is not considered. Leadership is always associated with change, however, under continuously changing conditions of the competitive environment, managers may not always be initiators of positive changes, and employees themselves often know best what could facilitate their work and make it more successful. Therefore, leadership at multicultural organisations has started to be seen as the ability of an organisation as a whole, rather than an exceptional feature of a few top managers. The purpose of the study is to identify complex approach on multicultural team management and leadership. In order to reach the purpose of the study, qualitative research method and in-depth interviewing has been chosen. Questions and statements in the questionnaire reflect multicultural aspect: as people have different values, they are more culturally linked. It leads to differentiation of values and this can cause misunderstandings while communicating with co-workers from other cultures. Moreover, miscommunication can be caused by misperception, misinterpretation and misevaluation.*

**Keywords:** *multicultural team management, leadership approach, miscommunication, misperception, in-depth interviewing*

### 1. Introduction

In order to reveal phenomenon of successful management of a group of people, some authors focus mainly on opportunities for the pursuit of activities and ability to assume responsibility and underline the need for unconventional thinking of a leader, which would be different from that of others. Other researchers claim that the following features are of importance for a person in charge of the group of people: insight, discipline, enthusiasm, precision, creativity, adjustment of personal modesty, obedience and professional goals (Vardiman et al., 2006; Yukl, 2006; Amagoh, 2009; Allio, 2005; Aronson, 2001). However, researchers proposing a different view argue that such a traditional approach to the management of a group of people is possible only when organisations are understood as balance-seeking systems in which the individuals planning scenarios and controlling behaviours are aware of and envisage the future perspective of an organisation. Nevertheless, researchers agree that managers of organisations are an example for employees in promoting values, adhering to standards of conduct and seeking strategic goals, sustainable performance in multicultural context and longevity of the organisations (Reinertsen et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2003; Antonakis & Hooijberg 2007).

Management and leadership in organisations reflect mutually complementary, though at times contradictory roles; hence to distinguish between a manager and a leader is very important. Leadership is designed to address confusion, because the order and procedures are to a certain extent a response to one of the most important events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely, the emergence of large organisations (Kouzes, Posner 2004; Reinertsen et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2003). Without sound management, organisations plunge into chaos causing a threat to their existence (Kotter, 1990). Sound management promotes order and sustainability in such key areas as quality and profitability. However, the employees who are well managed may lose an inspiration to seek to achieve more. Only good leaders are able to continuously encourage this aspiration and to achieve extraordinary results with ordinary people. Good managers achieve the results of well-planned and well-performed tasks, but rarely experience great success resulting from enthusiastic devotion that is inspired by true leaders (Kotter, 1990; Bedian & Hunt 2006; Hoffman & Woehr, 2009; Hunter, et al., 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Waldman et al., 2004).

Leadership is described as an art of motivating a group of people to act towards achieving a common goal (Hunter et al., 2007; Burns, 2003) thus it is important that the company management would inspire employees' motivation to work with passion as well as having willingness to reach organizational goals. There are a lot of different cultures in the world as well as leadership approaches can vary in different countries. Researchers suggest that Top or middle managers should be able to transform leadership styles in order to successfully lead employees in a multicultural context (e.g. Alia et al., 2015). If a leader chooses appropriate leadership style it can lead organization to greater success as well as make organization's employees proactive and dynamic Alia et al., 2015). Culture plays a fundamental role in peoples' perception of the world thus perception of the world and culture has a major impact on one another. Consequently, leadership cannot be effective if diversity of cultures, likewise values, habits, communication style, history, language, is not considered (Aitken, 2007; Alia et al., 2015; Yahaya, 2015).

The purpose of the study is to identify complex approach on multicultural team management and leadership. In order to reach the purpose of the study, qualitative research method and in-depth interviewing has been chosen. Questions and statements in the questionnaire reflect multicultural aspect: as people have different values, they are more culturally linked. It leads to differentiation of values and this can cause misunderstandings while communicating with co-workers from other cultures. Moreover, miscommunication can be caused by misperception, misinterpretation and misevaluation.

## **2. Multicultural Teams Management and Leadership Approach in Scientific Literature**

New researches include multi-layer phenomenon of leadership at multicultural organisations, which includes as a determinant a higher collective level (team, group or organisation) and identifies factors determining interaction of a leader and his followers: influence, confidence, decision-making process, reciprocity-based relationships, and leadership behaviour based on multicultural context (Bass, 2006). The conception of leadership at multicultural organization emphasises two-way interactions of a leader and followers, as the reciprocity of relationships between a leader and followers and its quality are of utmost importance for the expression of leadership style and manifestation of long-term leadership practices within multicultural organisations (Hofmann, Jones 2005). Reciprocity-based relationships are associated with enhanced satisfaction of team members of different nationalities at organisation, greater commitment to the organisation, higher productivity and lower staff turnover. It leads to a question of who can be considered as a competent manager and what leadership approach determines effective leadership at multicultural organisation which due to its business profile and geographical territory hires employees of different nationalities and cultures? What leadership is most effective in seeking to achieve strategic goals, sustainable performance and longevity of multicultural organisations?

There are no two nationalities' people who see and perceive the world the same way. Perception is defined as a process when a person selects, organizes, and evaluates stimuli from external factors and is willing to provide important value for oneself. Basically, everyone gets his/her perception by what he/she sees, hears and learns. Misinterpretation is also important because people tend to peculiarly interpret others' words, actions and behavior. According to

researchers misinterpretation can be caused by incorrect perceptions of a person or situation that arises when what actually exists is not clearly seen (Amitay et al., 2005; Sun & Anderson 2011; Aitken, 2007). Culture strongly influences as well as in many cases determines peoples' interpretations. Misedvaluation occurs when a person – an employee - does not clearly understand other cultures employees' spoken language, idioms or slang words. Meaning of such words can be different in different cultures thus can lead to essential misunderstandings. On the other hand, cultural variety can help a leader and a manager to learn from every day communication thus to develop most effective leadership at multicultural organization.

As culture may have an impact on leadership approach of a leader there are more obstacles that must be analyzed, e.g. a language barrier if native languages of team members differ, peculiarity of the team members' spoken language if the team members are from different countries (Kappagomtula, 2017). It might cause minor problems within a group in short term; nonetheless it may lead to significant problems over time.

Diversity of native languages may cause some disagreements between multinational team members; also the dominant language in the team may not be native language for every member of a group. Lack of skills or fluency in the dominant language used in a team may let others' think that some employee is not educated enough or that the employee is not competent enough for the particular work or task. This can make it impossible for the team members to use their knowledge and experiences full scope (Brett et al., 2006). Such a team members in this kind of situation may split into smaller groups, which later may cause difficulties in every day work activities. To manage problems and disagreements in a multicultural team is a core aim; it also proves how strong the team and the team leader are. Four actions and their differences one from another are described in the table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Actions and their characteristics

**Action 1: Adaptation**

<b>Representative problems</b>	<b>Enabling situational conditions</b>	<b>Complicating factors</b>
Conflict arises from decision making differences; Misunderstanding or stone-walling arises from communication differences.	Team members can attribute a challenge to culture rather than personality; Higher-level managers are not available or the team would be embarrassed to involve them.	Team members must be exceptionally aware; Negotiating a common understanding takes time.

**Action 2: Structural intervention**

The team is affected by emotional tensions relating to fluency issues or prejudice; Team members are inhibited by perceived status differences among teammates.	The team can be subdivided to mix cultures or expertise; Tasks can be subdivided.	If team members are not carefully distributed, subgroups can strengthen preexisting differences; Subgroup solutions have to fit back together.
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**Action 3: Managerial intervention**

Violations of hierarchy have resulted in loss of face; An absence of ground rules is causing conflict.	The problem has produced a high level of emotion; The team has reached a stalemate; A higher-level manager is able and willing to intervene.	The team becomes overly dependent on the manager; Team members may be sidelined or resistant.
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**Action 4: Exit**

A team member cannot adjust to the challenge at hand and has become unable to contribute to the project.	The team is permanent rather than temporary; Emotions are beyond the point of intervention; Too much face has been lost.	Talent and training costs are lost.
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**Source:** (Brett et al., 2006).

Multicultural organizations' teams often face some difficulties with disassembled managing dilemmas. The differences which occur from cultural variety can create an obstruction for effective and beneficial teamwork. Nevertheless it is hard to notice them in the early stage because of the subtleness thus a major damage could arise because of not recognizing it (Brett et al., 2006). The challenge in leading multicultural groups efficiently is to identify from which cultural aspect a conflict arises as well as to decide the ways of how to deal with it, how to discuss with the team thus to learn best solutions.

If a company hires different cultures' employees and there is no dominant culture in the team, lack of trustiness between team members can also occur. Kappagomtula (2017) states that geographically dispersed team members complexity is the "lack of trust syndrome", which means that a leader has to start undertaking small situations immediately before they grow into major issues. The longer trustiness is not built up the major misunderstandings and further problems it can cause. According to Kappagomtula (2017) the leader's aim is to nurture commitment of each member to the team right from the start so that all employees are at the same level with the unanimous understanding and holistic vision of their scope of work to be done. It is important that all employees in the multinational team are having similar mindset as their leader, which consists of the work or the cultural behavior, or the peculiar communication path which every member will adopt while working in a group. The leaders should approach leadership to lighten all members of the multinational team to fully understand particularity of working norms as well as to adjust themselves well to the culture of work for the task they are performing Kappagomtula (2017).

### 3. Research Method and Respondents' Characteristics

The purpose of the research – to identify complex approach on multicultural team management and leadership in organisation under study - Forbes Candies Inc., to analyze leadership approaches when leaders are working in a team with employees from Lithuania. Forbes Candies Inc. is situated in Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA, and is well-known candy shop since 1930. Forbes Candies Inc. hires employees from other countries, including Lithuania, for seasonal work from June until September annually.

To achieve the purpose, a qualitative research method - in-depth interviewing - has been employed. 6 managers working on behalf of Forbes Candies Inc. participated in the in-depth interviewing: 1 chief executive officer, 1 regional general manager, 2 store managers and 2 assistant managers. The respondents were 2 male and 4 female and the age of the respondents varies from 22 to 60; on the average of 33 years. The interview questions have been designed with reference to Economist Intelligence Unit researches as well as J. Brett, K. Behfar, C.M. Kern scientific studies. The interviewing was organized by sending questionnaires and receiving the respondents' answers via email on September 15 – October 8, 2018.

### 4. Research Findings

In order to reach the research purpose the interviewing questionnaire has been distributed to the 6 leading managers at Forbes Candies Inc. As soon as answers of the respondents have been received and systematized a qualitative content analysis has been performed. Answers of the respondents were categorized into certain categories and subcategories.

The first question "*What is your job position at Forbes Candies and what are your main functional roles at Forbes Candies?*" was aimed to distinguish several key aspects that could categorize role of the respondents, i.e. how they assume what are their duties and if the duties include leading the team, their co-workers at their every day work. Only one respondent, E5, stated that one's functional role was to manage the team: "*I'm responsible for opening and closing the store, running the store, ordering the products for the store and to supervise coworkers to do their job while the manager is gone.*".

Surprisingly, other respondents thought that managing the team is not their functional role and that they are only concentrated on order roles, E2: "*Running 5 stores and a warehouse. I buy all the merchandise and make sure the stores are running smoothly, kept full & making money.*"; E6:

*"...and the roles that I would take on would be to run the store while the manager is gone, work the register, help customers, clean, complete store orders, perform opening and closing duties".* Other respondents mentioned their co-workers only once, which was E3: *"My main functional roles are hiring and firing employees, making workers' schedules..."* and E4: *"...hiring and terminating employees, making and implementing schedules..."* which could be said that they are responsible for working schedules of employees.

To summarize there was no significant highlight of the importance of leadership as itself and leading others' among the respondents. The answers indicate that majority of the respondents were more focused on the products and sales rather than leading the team.

With the second question *"How do you define leadership? Do you think that leadership is based on having good relations with your co-workers or to achieve your goals?"* was aimed to identify what kind of leadership they understand as effective, what leadership practices are perceived as most important.

Respondent E2 emphasized: *"I do believe you have to have good relationships with your co-workers or else I don't think anyone would listen and things would fall apart fast"*, which shows how important good relationship is. The respondent E1 noted: *"I believe a good leader is a slave to those that work for them"*, and the respondent E4 added: *"Leadership is showing your subordinates that you are willing to do the dirty work yourself..."*, which shows the dedication for a team and how important their co-workers or subordinates are for them and that a good leader is the one who works even harder than others in the team.

The respondents emphasize importance to create workplaces that employees would be happy thus would provide as best services as they can. Respondent E1 stated: *"A leader does everything possible to create the perfect environment so that the staff can be the best they can be"*, the respondent E2 noted: *"...someone who can keep things running smoothly with everyone staying happy"*, which proves that a leader thinks of their subordinates as well as believes that having a happy worker could mean having a good customer.

Answers to the third question *"How many years of experience do you have working with employees from Lithuania?"* varied significantly as the CEO of the company has had the longest experience with Lithuanians while others' experiences were much shorter, i.e. from 2 to 12 years. As the experience varies the answers to the other questions also have a variety, which is seen greatly.

The fourth question *"What are the differences between native workers and Lithuanian workers in the working area? Do the differences have any impact on the work results?"* was aimed to reveal cultural differences and how it affects the company as a whole, also co-workers.

The biggest excitement about Lithuanian workers was expressed by the CEO: *"Most of what I have experienced with Lithuanian workers has been 99% positive"*. Other respondents stated that *"Lithuanians have a great work ethic"*, the respondent E1 added: *"Americans expect too much, and aren't willing to work for it."*, the respondent E2 said: *"I've noticed that Lithuanians seem to work a bit harder having that immigrant mentality to prove that they are worthy."*

Other aspect which was mentioned in the responses was that Lithuanians want to learn, they are capable of learning fast, E2: *"They show the teenage kids that we hire that they can basically run laps around them and this isn't even their hometown"* and they stay focused during work time, E1: *"that brings with it a laser focused person"* or, E1: *"Americans expect too much, and aren't willing to work for it"* or E5 *"Lithuanians are more responsible and flexible... They are usually easy to train at any kind of tasks and I would say that they are better employees than our native ones"* which shows the respondents' opinion about employees from Lithuania being hard working and responsible.

Fifth question *"Do you see any differences in leading workers from Lithuania? If yes, what kind of differences do you see and how they differ from leading local employees?"* was included in order to find out of how managers of Forbes Candies Inc. see differences in leading the different culture employees' and how the leadership approach can differ.

Majority of the respondents stated that the biggest difference was different language as it may create a natural barrier, as it is not Lithuanians' native language, E2: *"Just the language barrier. Sometimes that can make things difficult"*, or E4: *"Though majority speaks English, it is not their*

*native tongue, creating natural barriers*". The answers of the respondents show that language barrier sometimes may cause essential misunderstandings at work, also in every day communication.

The respondents also mentioned that is much easier to work with Lithuanians as they do not need to be asked to work, they just do what they have to do, E1: *"Managing a Lithuanian is very easy. Once again there is a focus that success is everything. No loss for an American who can go get another job or collect unemployment"*; E3: *"They have a good work ethic and because of that it's easy to work with them. I don't have to tell them what to do much, they know what they're supposed to do and they do that"*; E6: *"The differences I saw was that it was easy to work with Lithuanians, they were respectful, friendly, hard workers."*

The answers show that Lithuanians differ from employees of other nationalities if it comes to their attitude to work ethic and every day work duties: *"While others can be a little tough to work with and some workers loved to create chaos in the workplace."*, as E4 stated.

Sixth question *"Of the following, which are most likely to cause the greatest misunderstanding in multicultural communication for your organization and why? Differences in cultural traditions in different countries/Different norms of workplace behavior/Diversity of languages across Lithuania and the United States/Different accents of people from Lithuania"* was sought to answer the question what kind of actions the company should undertake for making things better and what kind of strategy to use.

All respondents emphasized diversity of languages across Lithuania and the United States as a key aspect causing greatest misunderstanding in the multicultural communication at Forbes Candies Inc., E2: *"Diversity of languages across Lithuania and the United States. This can be tough but better with time and patience"*; E4: *"...the diversity of languages across Lithuania and the United States coupled with different accents of people from Lithuania caused some misunderstandings in the organization. Lack of common language and understanding form natural barriers."*; E6: *"I think the diversity of language may cause misunderstanding of communication"*.

The difference in accents was also mentioned in the respondents' answers and it might is not major reason of misunderstandings in a company, however, it occurs and it shows that it affects the overall atmosphere at the workplace, E1: *"Americans will hear Lithuanians talking to each other, and quickly assume they are from Russia. Americans for the most part don't trust Russians, and are likely to be less friendly to that person from Lithuania"*. This answer shows that different accent can be a major issue with the clients while working in the service area. If there is no trust among clients with the staff serving clients, the clients might never come back to the store again. E4 also stated that different accents are also an issue within a company: *"different accents of people from Lithuania caused some misunderstandings in the organization."*

The respondents also discussed traditions, such as how Lithuanians speak and how they act in the situations, i.e. native Americans and Lithuanians would act in a different way, E3: *"Cultural traditions seem to cause the greatest miscommunication in multicultural communication for my organization because there can be where workers are too straightforward and don't seem to understand how to approach clients without sounding too direct"*; E5: *"I would say cultural traditions and language. A lot of Lithuanians were working straightforward with our clients, thus their cultural habits were hard to understand for our guests. Even though Americans are very tolerant, we had some unsatisfied clients."* The answers show that cultural traditions can affect not only the co-workers, but the clients too.

All the respondents' answers show that the most misunderstanding in a company comes from different cultures, different languages and accents. Nevertheless Lithuanians are great workers, they work hard and want to learn new things and they do not make any chaos in the working place, however, they can create some misunderstandings and issues with some of native American co-workers and even with the clients. As the CEO could use the "Exit strategy" and not to hire Lithuanians for seasonal work anymore, much better solution could be the "Adaptation strategy", i.e. to communicate more with Lithuanians and native Americans about the differences, to accept the differences, to try to reduce them by teaching Lithuanians of how not to sound too direct, not to talk too straight.

Seventh question *"How do cultural factors or differences, such as language (having in mind*

fluency and accent) and local customers affect your company? For example, do you feel that miscommunication between co-workers leads the team to divide into groups, or workers not fluent in English seem not well educated or not competent enough?" allowed acknowledging of how language barriers could affect the company and if the language could be a reason that Lithuanians seem not competent enough. Furthermore, it also provides with more knowledge for choosing a strategy which company could apply for better collaboration and effect.

The respondent E1, CEO of the company, would not even allow treating Lithuanians differently because of their language barriers for other staff members: *"There is no difference in what Americans that work for my company think about non-English speaking staff. Most of my staff is not feel negative towards Lithuanian staff. I wouldn't allow it"*. The respondent also mentioned that there are no staff members which feel negatively about Lithuanians. E2 said the same: *"I absolutely do not think the language barrier meant someone was not competent or well educated."* which can show that the language barriers does not affect peoples' thinking that someone is not educated enough. E3 agreed: *"Companies plans don't seem to differ that much from cultural factors or differences in language"*. The respondent E2 stated a bit differently: *"It does seem the "locals" and foreign employees did divide up sometimes, but not always. I tried to make sure they felt welcome and I always said I was there for anything they needed."*

Some of the respondents assumed that the differences may even strengthen the team as the Lithuanians could supplement the team with the different approach, E5: *"These differences even help for our team to feel more as a team. Everyone was really helpful to Lithuanians, helped to learn specific words, explained phrases and even helped them to improve their pronunciation."* This is a good example of how a little effort could make a team stronger and it shows how "Adaptation Strategy" should look like, E6: *"The Lithuanians that I had the chance to work with, were curious as to what certain sayings in English meant and we actually learned a little about each other's languages... would lead to someone else having to step in and either explain or help the customer themselves, but it was never the Lithuanians fault, some customers in the summertime were just plain rude."* This explains how strong a team was as soon as negative situation popped out and how they dealt with it, how stood up for each other. Furthermore, E4 added that the differences need to be learnt: *"With natural language barriers miscommunication is something that companies must expect when hiring foreigners. Language barriers must be learnt and embraced by current staff for the company to thrive with people of different cultural backgrounds."* and it also needs to be expected and prepared for, which also is possible to implement with the "Adaptation strategy".

The eighth question *"In your opinion, what are the most important factors for effective multicultural collaboration in your company and how do they influence everyone's work? Do you think that you need better understanding of Lithuanian culture for even better collaboration and to achieve harmony in the work area?"* was sought to identify what can make collaboration between different nationalities workers' better and smoother as well as what strategy should be implemented.

The respondent E1 mentioned that as he was hiring the Lithuanians for approximately 12 years, he has never tried to learn or understand Lithuanian culture as he was trying so hard to show America's culture, nevertheless he sees that the values are most important factor: *"I believe that the way I was raised growing up is a lot like what I see in the values of the Lithuanian workers that come here and work."* Furthermore, E2 stated that understanding of Lithuanian culture would be great for collaboration: *"I would love to learn more about Lithuanian culture so that I have a better understanding of my employees and where they come from"*. E4 also mentioned that there is a need of learning Lithuanian culture: *"It is important for everyone to learn the different cultures being brought into the work place and the positive things that they can offer to everyone in the company."* Furthermore, E5 also mentioned that being open, friendly to one another and most important – openness and willingness to learn each other's cultures – would cause better collaboration in a multicultural team: *"Open to learning about each other's culture, but also patient when it comes to learning the ropes of the job and training."*

As most of the respondents answered that the best collaboration could be reached through better knowledge of the cultures' differences, E3 added that it could be reached through group policy too: *"The most important factor for affective multicultural collaboration in my work area seems*

to be the group policy. When people know where they stand and know the chain of command there is no room for miscommunication". All respondents agree that the knowledge about Lithuanian culture may allow developing better collaboration in the company.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

For the centuries leadership has been studied and analyzed a lot but as the world changes – leadership approaches also change. It is also a very much complex phenomenon, but still remains important to keep achieving the best in it. It is important that a leader and a manager would inspire and motivate employees willing to work with passion and to reach organization's goals. As there are a lot of different cultures in the world, there are also a lot of different leadership approaches in different countries. Furthermore, culture is a fundamental role in people's perception of the world. There are a lot of researches and studies analyzing and identifying that people from different cultures understand things differently. Nevertheless, not only culture has a major impact on leadership approaches, but there are also complex factors which influence a leader's management. Firstly, language barrier, when team members are of different native languages and different languages are spoken by the team members. Secondly, no trustiness between team members and there is no trust building initiatives from a team leader.

Leadership is always associated with change, however, under continuously changing conditions of the competitive environment, managers may not always be initiators of positive changes, and employees themselves often know best what could facilitate their work and make it more successful. Therefore, leadership at multicultural organisations has started to be seen as the ability of an organisation as a whole, rather than an exceptional feature of a few top managers (Conger, 1993; Conger, 1999; Beeson, 1998; McCall, 1998; Bennis, 1999; O'Toole, 2001). Otherwise, multicultural organisations can be strong from a technical point of view, but weak from the point of view of vision setting and direction and focusing, which is a vital precondition for ensuring continuity and longevity of the organisations' functioning. To some extent, leadership has recently become so important due to the fact that the business world has become highly competitive, trend-oriented and dynamic, multinational and specifically multicultural; and is constantly changing (Block & Manning 2007; Bennis et al., 2008). The problem of the systemic assessment of the factors affecting leadership and management links a large number of relevant researches and practical managerial elements which as yet have no straightforward solutions. Surely one of the practical managerial elements is a multicultural context.

## 6. Limitations and Further Research

As limitations arise in researches this study is not an exception. It was encountered with the organization's resistance to participate in the survey due to confidentiality and anonymity aspects, therefore while performing in-depth interview it was very important to inspire trust of all the respondents: the assessments will remain anonymous; the assessments will remain confidential; the results will be used for positive purposes. Furthermore, the research results cannot be generalized because of the small sample of the respondents in the in-depth interview and that methods such as random samplings are not used. Nonetheless, sample size for in-depth interviews is sufficient and informative if the majority of respondents share similar opinions as well as the respondents' answers on different aspects do not differ substantially. The in-depth interview, as the research tool, linked with the qualitative research methodology could be combined with quantitative research methods; and could be tested and improved, and the dimensional content could be filled with findings of further empirical research.

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