

Understanding Well-being in Virtual Teams:

A Comparative Case Study

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Abstract. Although virtual teams (VTs) have been around for over two decades, there are no studies explicitly examining their members' well-being. Motivated, therefore, by a knowledge gap in the VT literature, and a practical need to understand well-being in this context due to the Covid-19 pandemic which has led to an unprecedented transition into virtual working, in this paper, we draw on 14 interviews and present initial findings of a comparative case between two European organizations involving different types (global vs. local) of VTs (Phase 1). Using the job demands-resources (JDR) model as our theoretical lens, we make the following contributions: We identify the situated character of job demands and resources among our participants, explaining how VT members experience simultaneously increased job demands and reduced job resources, which, in combination, may substantially impair their well-being. We also find that understandings of demands and resources are idiosyncratic and vary depending on prior individual experiences of VT members. We discuss initial theoretical and practical contributions of Phase 1 of our study and outline our next steps (Phases 2 and 3).

Keywords: Virtual Teams, Well-Being, Job Demands-Resources.

1 Introduction

Virtual teams (VTs) have been around for over two decades and have recently regained popularity because of an unprecedented transition into virtual working due to the Covid-19 pandemic. VTs are generally known for their benefits for both the employer and the employee [1], but also for their challenges, including trust [2], leadership [3], conflict [4], creativity [5], and, more recently, engagement [6, 7]. During the last two decades, scholars from information systems (IS), general management and kindred fields have sought to understand how these challenges can be managed and what they mean for organizations, leaders, and individuals, generally concluding that the management of VTs is different due to the unique characteristics (e.g., dispersion,

technology-mediation), suggesting that older management practices based on traditional, face-to-face (F2F) environment may not always be suitable.

The existing literature on VTs mainly refers to global VTs (aka GVTs) which were typically formed to bring together global talent despite geographical boundaries in organizations' effort to develop a competitive advantage and/or to become more global [8]. In the current context, it has been argued that VTs were not developed for competition or globalization purposes, but for survival [9]. According to these authors, VTs that were formed in early 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic are more local in character compared to the GVTs that dominated the literature in the pre-Covid-19 era, and they are known for different types of challenges, including new phenomena such as Zoom fatigue [9]. What we see therefore is that different types of VTs engender different types of challenges based on their (different) characteristics. Irrespective of VT type, employee well-being constitutes a significant topic and is seen as a prerequisite for effective working in the traditional management literature [10, 11]. Individual well-being at work results from the interplay of personal, job and organizational characteristics [12]. Perceptions of well-being are constructed by actors while they make and attribute meaning to the world, drawing upon their previous experiences [13]. In this sense, well-being is a subjective experience [14] that needs to be explored through the eyes of employees [15, 16].

In this paper, we present a comparative case study on VT members' perceptions of well-being [14] (Phase 1). Recognizing that different types of VTs experience different challenges, we focus on two European organizations – one involving GVTs and a local one involving locally (nationally) dispersed VTs – in our quest to understand how well-being is experienced in VTs with dissimilar levels of geographical dispersion. We conducted a total of 14 interviews with (G)VT members of the two organizations and used the job demands-resources (JDR) model [17] in order to classify thematically [18] the factors that influence workers' sense of well-being within the (G)VT context.

This comparative study is Phase 1 of a larger study involving an additional 28 interviews following a cross-sectorial multi-case study approach (Phase 2) and an envisaged follow-up quantitative diary study (Phase 3). Our study is the first one to explicitly study the topic of well-being in VTs building on a recognition of its importance within both the GVT [19] and the local (largely Covid-19-driven) VT context [9]. Drawing on the JDR model, we find that our Phase 1 participants' experiences and perceptions of job demands, and job resources are oftentimes situated. Phase 1 findings explain how VT members experience simultaneously increased job demands and reduced job resources, which, in combination, may substantially impair their well-being. We also find that understandings of demands and resources are idiosyncratic and vary depending prior individual experiences of VT members. These findings are important and of value to a multidisciplinary audience of academics (e.g., IS, management, human resources (HR)), (G)VT members and leaders, HR professionals and professional bodies that may need to revisit their policies given the recent interest in VTs worldwide, as well as to educators teaching students on new ways of working, involving work in VTs.

In what follows, we present relevant theory (Section 2), our methodological approach (Section 3), our findings from Phase 1 (Section 4) and preliminary

contributions (Section 5), and close the paper with our conclusions, the limitations of Phase 1 and our next steps (Section 6).

2 Relevant Literature

2.1 The Literature on (G)VTs

Commonly defined as groups of coworkers who are geographically, temporally and/or organizationally dispersed and work together via information and communication technologies (ICTs) [e.g., 20], VTs are known for their unique characteristics: the aforementioned types of dispersion, as well as their reliance on ICTs [1]. Scholars agree that there exist different types of VTs based on the above dimensions – e.g., global vs. local; inter- vs. intra-organizational; pure virtual vs. hybrid; and temporary vs. permanent; VTs consisting of subgroups vs. geographically isolated members – each with a distinct set of characteristics, and therefore, different types of challenges.

VT scholars have primarily sought to understand how management practices should be adapted to accommodate those challenges, and indeed, a wealth of empirical studies has emerged that advances theoretical knowledge in this literature and has been used to inform practitioners on the ground too. What these studies have in common is their focus on the issue of performance, i.e., scholars have focused on how, for example, leadership should be practiced in order to ensure that VTs are high-performing and able to deliver their tasks on time and successfully. Although recently we have seen a shift in focus on topics such as engagement within the VT context [7], this too has been studied in an effort to understand what VT leaders can do to ensure that their VTs continue to perform well. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought hidden aspects of work in VTs to the surface due to the sudden proliferation of this type of work across industries and the globe in an enforced way. Contrary, therefore, to previous VTs that were more global in character and were developed for different purposes, as explained in Section 1, new VTs are the result of an enforced work from home approach that introduces new challenges [21].

Focusing on these new challenges, emerging literature in response to the Covid-19 VTs highlights that VT members who work from home find it hard to coexist and deliver their work successfully when sharing their home-based workspace with others (e.g., family, housemates) or in parallel with other commitments (e.g., home-schooling, caring responsibilities), and that, although work may be delivered, their personal sense of well-being might be at stake [9]. Well-being has been recognized previously by HR scholars as an important and yet overlooked aspect of virtual teamwork [19], however, it remains an underexplored area in the VT literature [22].

Our position in this paper is that well-being constitutes an important area in all types of VTs for different reasons and it is important because without it we may have high-performing, but not necessarily sustainable, VTs [10, 23]. An important contributor to VT success is the selection of pertinent ICTs as without ICTs work in VTs would not be feasible [8]. While ICTs feature as the primary enabler of work in VTs, they have also been identified as causing burnout due to prolonged and inadequate use [9]. Media synchronicity theory suggests that ICTs vary in terms of their degree of synchronicity

from lean (asynchronous, e.g., email) to rich (synchronous, e.g., videoconferencing) ones and that different ICTs work better for different tasks [24].

Questions therefore arise as to how the unique characteristics of (different types of) VTs, such as reliance on ICTs, influence their members' sense of well-being. Explored next is a model we borrow from the HR field that will help us frame those characteristics in a way that enables understanding of how VT members' well-being is influenced within this context.

2.2 Job Demands-Resources (JDR) Framework

The JDR is a heuristic model [25] that provides grounds to investigate the impact of work factors on employee well-being in any type of occupation [26], ranging from dentists [27] to cabin crew members [28]. This model encompasses two traditionally separate literatures on job stress and work motivation to dynamically explain how changing working conditions may be related to individual and organizational outcomes.

The JDR model was originally developed to explore how job characteristics are connected to burnout [29]. This connection relies on two fundamental propositions. First, the JDR model claims that all types of job aspects (physical, psychological, social or organizational) can be categorized in one of two groups: job demands and job resources [17]. Job demands refer to elements of the job that require continued effort, let it be cognitive, emotional or physical. Role overload [30], role conflict [31], urgency or uncertainty [12], exemplify job demands. Job resources refer to aspects of the job that are useful in terms of: (a) meeting work objectives; (b) diminishing job demands and their associated cost; or (c) encouraging employee learning and growth. Job resources can be offered to employees at three different levels: organizational, interpersonal and individual [32]. Job security, role clarity, autonomy or performance feedback are commonly cited job resources.

Second, the JDR model proposes that these job characteristics are connected to employee well-being through two differential psychological mechanisms [17]. On the one hand, the health-impairment process posits that excessive sustained job demands (e.g., ongoing uncertainty) deplete employees of energy, leading to exhaustion and strain. On the other hand, the motivation process assumes that job resources contribute to employees fulfilling needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness [33]. For instance, receiving constructive feedback can help individuals see the purpose of their effort, motivating them to engage further. In addition, the model postulates two interactive mechanisms: (a) job resources may mitigate the positive relationship between job demands and job strain (e.g., having a supportive boss may reduce the negative influence of uncertainty) [34]; and (b) job resources have a stronger influence on motivation when job demands are high (receiving constructive feedback is more beneficial for those who deal with ongoing tight deadlines) [17].

Following our literature review in the area of VTs and with the JDR serving as our theoretical lens, we develop following research question which we seek to address in this paper: How is well-being perceived in different types of VTs (global vs. local)?

3 Methodological Approach

3.1 Phase 1 Case Organizations and Participants

We followed a qualitative case study approach with two European organizations: a national transportation company (Company A) involving national VTs spread across the country, and a strategic management holding (Company B) involving GVTs. Case studies are suitable when wanting to gain in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within an organizational context, which may also contain truth that also can be applicable elsewhere [35]. This approach was a suitable one given the exploratory character of our study.

The only criterion for participant recruitment was current VT membership (global or local) and we also aimed for some balance between VT leaders and VT members. The former had more than four years of leadership experience in roles like recruitment, assistance, purchasing or controlling. Eleven German and three Italian participants were interviewed (in German and English respectively), and 57% of the participants were female. GVT participants were based in Asia, the USA, Italy, or Germany and all had more than one year VT experience at the time of interviewing. We selected participants of different VTs in order to paint a rich picture of the VTs in the selected organizations. We recruited 14 participants across the two organizations until we felt that saturation had been reached.

3.2 Phase 1 Data Collection and Analysis Process

Semi-structured interviews constituted our main data collection method and we also sent out questionnaires to gather bio-demographical information of our participants. An interview guide was developed after carefully reviewing the relevant literature. The interview guide was designed to cover all relevant areas (e.g., VT experience, whether their work was demanding). All 14 interviews lasted a little over one hour each, took place between June and August 2016.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed on NVivo. We followed an interpretivist approach [36] and were guided by the principles of grounded theory to analyze our data [37] in order to get an understanding of what would come out of the dataset without being biased from relevant literature. While open-coding, we created two large thematic categories – “positive experiences” and “negative experiences” – and included all open codes in them. Once open coding was completed, and following numerous meetings among the authors, we used the JDR model to thematically categorize all open codes into axial codes. These constituted our final codes and included: task overload, role ambiguity, personal factors, and interpersonal factors, among others, all being factors associated with either job demands or job resources as per the JDR model.

4 Phase 1 Research Findings

Participants’ accounts suggest that virtual teamworking has an influence on employee well-being because it substantially impacts individual experiences at work. Our

interviewees described how working in VTs involved the emergence of additional job demands, which created an extra source of strain and potential distress. At the same time, they reported how this type of work involved the appearance of supplementary job resources, which may act as a source of motivation.

4.1 Emerging Job Demands in VTs

The participants described various experiences and factors related to virtual teamworking that required substantial effort, in addition to their standard task related effort. In this sense, our participants' experiences suggest that working in a VT may generate *task overload* (in VTs, workers perform extra activities that add to their load) and *role ambiguity* (in VTs, workers have less opportunities to learn what is expected of them from contextual interactions).

Task overload happens when a person experiences difficulties in fulfilling the requirements of their various tasks because of the collective demands such tasks impose on them. Our participants described five main factors that create new tasks for VT members and may lead to overload: technological problems, dealing with time differences, adapting to varying local working styles, overcoming the lack of body language and managing arising conflicts.

The use of ICTs is an inherent characteristic of VTs. Our participants' accounts suggest that, when present, technical problems with ICTs create additional tasks for VTs, which can generate task overload. One interviewee explained: *"if you have a meeting with a lot of people here and a lot of people at the other plant, and you have a bad connection - this can really be a problem sometimes to go ahead with the meetings if you have these connection problems."* (PB10). Another participant shared: *"...it is always a bit annoying when you spend the first 15 minutes trying to get someone to fix the technical problem and there are four or five other people on the line."* (PB02)

'To go ahead with the meetings' these workers are expected to either solve the technical problems or to be creative about information exchange. They often have to perform an IT-support function to their co-workers, which would not exist for a collocated team. However, they do not receive specific training for this. One of them said: *"I have not participated in any training measures in this direction, but I have also not heard from anyone that has."* (PA02).

Often, the additional demands creating task overload described by our participants were specifically connected to the global nature of their VT. For instance, technical problems were more frequently mentioned by the GVT participants. This is probably linked to their interaction with countries having varying strengths of Internet connection and their use of more heterogeneous devices. Other demands were linked to the increased locational and cultural diversity experienced in GVTs. For instance, time or local working style differences were described by several GVT members as difficult to deal with, challenging, problematic and creating new tasks to fulfil.

Regarding time differences, finding common time slots clashed with respecting each participant's normal working hours because they required very early-morning or late-evening meetings. One of the participants said: *"Of course, when it came to China, I knew that I had to be there tomorrow at 8:30am because they wanted to go home, they*

had already finished work, so you always had to take that into account. That's why these monthly meetings with China always took place in the morning, and the others with Brazil and America in the late afternoon." (PB09). This participant's account indicates how both she and her Chinese colleagues had to work overtime in order to manage their team responsibilities and to interact.

For PB10, the mere fact of finding time slots that were within everyone's core working time was an additional role to be fulfilled which required extra time or making concessions and working outside their usual working hours. When this participant was probed about his feelings regarding this problem he said: *"it is a little bit difficult, but we don't have many options, we need to do it like this"* (PB10).

Cultural differences were also described as a source of additional tasks: *"To be honest, I find it much more difficult to work in a VT than in a team that is really on site. Um, the reasons for that [...] We simply had different ways of working and bringing that together was sometimes a bit difficult."* (PB01). This account underlines how virtual teamworking has opened the door to teams being increasingly diverse. Although enriching, this diversity can require additional effort from employees who need to navigate different working styles and practices.

Our interviewees also described how missing body language in communicating with their teams created additional tasks: *"Yes, I think you do miss [body language] a bit. Because you really have to work on yourself to get it across when you don't have the opportunity to do it with gestures and facial expressions....so, it's better to talk too much than too little, because otherwise it doesn't come across!"* (PB09). Her account highlights how VT members need to work on their communication skills because they can seldom rely on non-verbal cues.

Other participants pointed out additional demands that emerge when cameras are not turned on: *"[Virtual working is] a bit more exhausting when [...] for example, there's a discussion and you only hear 5 different voices on the phone, for example, then I don't know... Oh God, who said what now? I think that's different when you have a live discussion [...] when someone hasn't even dialed in with the video (camera off) and you don't know where something is coming from that doesn't really add value basically."* (PA01). This interviewee experienced the lack of body language as 'exhausting' because she could not identify the person who transmitted information, suggesting the need for more concentration and cognitive dedication.

Finally, for GVTs, the management of conflicts also appeared to create additional tasks. One participant shared: *"What is demanding is conflict management, or the demanding, tough discussion - we sometimes have conflicts or opinions in the team [...] and it is demanding online to deal with them properly, or to structure them properly."* (PB04). Solving conflicts requires VT workers to perform tasks outside of what would be expected from them in a physical context. They experience this as less natural than having a F2F conversation and need to work on how to 'deal with them properly' or how 'to structure them properly'. While local VTs can circumvent this demand by dealing with conflict when they meet F2F (which in the case of company A happened approximately once a month), GVTs cannot because they only see each other sporadically (once a year for Company B).

In addition to role overload, our findings suggest VT workers experience role ambiguity. Role ambiguity exists when the expectations that need to be fulfilled in order to perform are doubtful or uncertain. VT workers, particularly in global contexts, can experience increased role ambiguity because they miss informal communication opportunities and may encounter language barriers.

Informal communication opportunities, such as unplanned chats in the hallway, seem to play an important role in clarifying expectations. Our participants pointed out that missing such interactions may create role ambiguity. For instance, an interviewee said: *"Mini-information that is exchanged informally, such as in the coffee kitchen 'Oh, just seeing you...I've just spoken to customer XY, have you heard?'...I think that gets lost."* (PA04).

This interviewee felt that information that would be passed on naturally by co-workers in a physical context by for example walking down a hallway or randomly meeting a co-worker in the coffee kitchen is not exchanged in a VT context. She explained this as information that *'gets lost'*, leaving her with lingering doubts about evolving tasks and responsibilities.

Language barriers can also create role ambiguity. Our GVT interviewees suggested that speaking different native languages or having varying levels of English may create confusing messages and miscommunication. For instance, one participant said: *"you speak a different language than the people or the headquarters and so (...) you don't have information"* (PB10). This respondent indicates how speaking a different language may entail missing information, which can lead to unclear tasks. Another explained how she tries to deal with this problem: *"...I sometimes speak much more slowly than I normally would, and when I notice that it's really extremely difficult linguistically, I also try to adapt by not only speaking slowly but also simple"* (PB02)

Overall, VT workers, particularly those belonging to GVTs, experience added tasks in comparison to physically collocated teams and have less chances to clarify what is expected of them and what different steps they should take in conducting their work. These additional job demands are found to be connected to the experience of job intensification, exhaustion and loneliness.

4.2 Reduced Job Resources in VTs

Participant accounts indicate that a variety of personal and interpersonal job resources diminish in a VT context. However, existing resources mitigate job demands' negative impact on well-being. In addition, the extent to which different factors are understood as resources by the participants depend on their prior VT working experiences.

First, regarding personal job resources, the key recurrent factor in participants' accounts is giving and receiving feedback. Many perceived lack of feedback because they were physically separated from co-workers or leaders: *"Well, it's actually more difficult because of that, which is why I also say that it should be systematized, because - so feedback among colleagues, you don't even notice all the work they do, everyone is more to themselves - and if someone doesn't notice that anymore [because of the physical distance], then they can't be given feedback anymore."* (PA04). This respondent expressed a feeling of being 'more to [her]self' because of being in a VT.

The decreased visibility of each worker's work and achievements make it harder to give and receive feedback and thus motivating appreciation and improvement tips.

Second, insofar as interpersonal resources are concerned, the informal interactions that enable colleagues to get to know one another often disappear in VTs. A member of a GVT highlighted: *"If I'm in a non-VT and the conversation is five minutes late because the meeting room is still occupied, the colleagues stand outside the door and talk about football or their children or the weather and get to know each other over time. Exactly at such a moment, every colleague hangs in the virtual queue and is annoyed that it is not happening now and that he is sitting there and is left alone."* (PB06).

The lack of an informal interaction is reinforced by the experience of feeling 'alone', waiting in the virtual void. The bonds that are developed at the interstices of work, seem to decline, both in quality and quantity due to physical separation and the lack of opportunities to develop more personal connections. One interviewee described this in the following terms: *"Because you have this physical distance, you certainly don't have such a close bond. You do a lot over the phone, yes, but it doesn't replace human contact..."* (PA04)

'Human contact' is valued as superior to virtual contact. For this reason, VT workers are keen on creating opportunities to meet in person and consider these meetings as a key resource, particularly when they start working together: *"at the beginning people have to get to know each other personally and therefore we usually do a kick-off at one of the locations where we say, 'Now let's all sit down together for a day and define how we are actually working'"* (PB06).

A F2F kick-off meeting allows VT members to establish the basis for building a personal relationship. The regular physical meetings that are possible for the local VT help maintain this interpersonal relationship. An interviewee said: *"F2F meetings in between [virtual meetings] are particularly important in order to strengthen the bond and also to get to know each other."* (PA02).

This participant experienced regular physical contact with her teammates as a valuable resource for 'strengthen[ing] the bond' between them. This appears to be a motivating factor having a positive impact on well-being. On the contrary, the members of the GVT who did not have this opportunity expressed feelings of loneliness and demotivation. One of them said *"The risk is that you feel a bit alone sometimes [...] you are alone in another country, you are not motivated anymore"* (PB10).

Although interpersonal resources seemed to decline for all participants, that does not mean that they do not experience such resources at all. On the contrary, they are sometimes indispensable to mitigate the negative effects of growing job demands. For example, one participant described in detail how the support of others enabled a person that was new to virtual interactions to cope with the demands of technology: *"We had, um, someone from another area invited to a WebEx, (...) although I did brief her beforehand, the lady couldn't cope with the technology (...) but all the other staff members were (...) already dialed in, and it was very nice how everyone then wrote her a message, a note or somehow said things like "Do this and that" and also absolutely supported her, which was really nice. I think the first quarter of an hour of the meeting was actually a funny cooperation, because we had to explain to the lady how everything*

works, and, um, I think that was still really nice for the whole team, because everyone had the feeling of being there and maybe being able to help the lady, and then, exactly [on time], the meeting started." (PA01)

The general positive disposition of the team members motivated everyone to be patient and left the participant a feeling of 'being there' for one another, despite the distance. This example illustrates the capacity of resources to limit the downsides of demands.

In sum, VT members seem to generally have less access to individual and interpersonal resources than if they were working in the same space as the rest of their team. Experiencing work with such diminished resources reduces motivation and creates feelings of loneliness and detachment from the team. However, when VT members experience resources, these have the potential to mitigate the negative influence of job demands individual well-being.

It must be noted that the extent to which each VT worker interprets certain factors as resources seems to be related to their prior experience in working virtually. For example, this is the case with F2F meetings. One participant was discouraged with the lack of F2F interaction with her supervisor, explaining that *"especially now, since [name hidden] is my boss, I think out of 30 days, maybe I see her for two days [in person]"* (PA01). This individual, who had limited experience working virtually did not interpret those two days of F2F contact a month as a resource that could counterbalance the demands of virtual work. On the contrary, a participant who had substantial experience working virtually understood punctual F2F meeting as relevant resources. He highlighted: *"we are at least trying to send the staff to Germany once, to get to know as many people as possible [in person] and to use this to build the first foundations [of interpersonal connections]."* (PB03). For him, a rare interaction ('at least once') was understood as an important step in building interpersonal job resources. These accounts underline that the understanding of resources is idiosyncratic and situated. Virtual workers will build on their prior experiences to develop contextual interpretations which may affect their well-being differently.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Driven by a recognized need to study well-being in the context of (G)VTs [e.g., 22], in this study we have used the JDR model from the HR literature to study (G)VT members' experiences and perceptions of job demands and job resources in particular. We have chosen two organizations, one involving GVT members and another involving locally (nationally) dispersed VT members, to identify similarities and differences in these two different types of VTs.

Our findings indicate that VT members experience additional job demands (e.g., role overload and role ambiguity) and reduced job resources. Our interviewees spoke about hidden aspects of their experiences in VTs, in relation to issues caused by ICTs for example. Although the VT literature has explained that different ICTs might be better for different tasks [24], the existing VT literature does not explain how hidden, formally

unacknowledged issues related to ICT use may affect VT members' experience of demands. A similar study has introduced the term 'digi-housekeeping' to refer to formally unrecognized, and yet time-consuming and often troublesome, tasks associated with flexible working [38]. Our study highlights that similar issues add to the demands experienced by the VT worker. Consequently, VT workers may experience more strain leading to decreased well-being. In our study, these additional demands were particularly salient for GVT. Time differences and expecting GVT colleagues from other locations to be available after hours is an example that can potentially lead to violations of one's work-life boundaries. It has been argued that work-life boundaries might be violated in alternative working environments, such as Covid-19 VTs [9], however our study shows that this is the case with traditional GVTs as well. Our findings therefore both corroborate and extend suspicions in the recent literature that demands in the VT context may indeed be higher than in F2F teams [9].

We also found that VT members also experience reduced resources such as support from colleagues or feedback, which may reduce their motivation and in turn their well-being. These findings relate to the lack of social context in the VT environment. Researchers have posited that establishing and maintaining a social context in VTs is essential [39]. Our study extends these findings by showing that establishing and maintaining a social context has a paramount effect on how resources are experienced by (G)VT members. At the same time, our study has shown that the same resources whose lack may be detrimental can be used to mitigate the negative impact of job demands. Our argument is therefore that these resources are critical to render VT working sustainable. Finally, our analysis of the two cases has highlighted that individual understandings of demands and resources are idiosyncratic and situated; they depend to a certain extent on prior experience with VTs. Understanding individual experiences is important to depict the connection between VT working and well-being.

5.2 Practical Contributions

Our study has important practical value for both VT leaders and VT members. The former should make sure that their VTs are sufficiently equipped with the necessary resources and that demands – even invisible and formally unrecognized demands – do not exceed the resources available to VT members. Although leaders have little room to reduce certain demands, offering VT members sufficient resources can mitigate the strain created by demands. They should also appreciate that the issue of well-being is largely a personal issue and may be experienced differently by different individuals in the same VTs. Therefore, an understanding of the situated character of well-being in relation to the VT configuration (e.g., local, global, inter-/intra-organizational) is necessary in this regard. VT members, on the other hand, should be comfortable sharing honestly and transparently with their leaders how they feel and what could improve the equilibrium between demands and resources while taking into consideration their own personal circumstances that may affect their ability to deliver on their tasks.

6 Conclusion, limitations, and next steps (Phases 2 and 3)

Using data on employee-lived experiences of working in VTs and drawing on job-demands-resources theory, we have shown that specific demands, such as task overload and role ambiguity, emerge from this type of work. Such demands, which differ for global and local teams, impair workers' well-being. At the same time, we found that VT members experience more difficulties accessing important resources such as feedback and interpersonal connections. As a result, they are more likely to struggle to fulfil basic needs of competence and relatedness, which mitigate the well-being downsides of job demands. Although understandings of demands and resources are idiosyncratic and vary depending on prior individual experiences of VT members, in combination, the experience of increased demands and reduced resources challenges the sustainability of VTs.

Our study has some limitations, such as our relatively small sample, which we will be overcoming with Phases 2 and 3 of our larger study. For Phase 2, we have already conducted 28 interviews with members of (G)VTs following a qualitative, cross-sectorial (e.g., consulting, aviation, IT) multi-case study approach. These interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, capturing issues affecting well-being, which are more relevant today. We are currently in the process of analyzing those data and by the time of the conference we expect to be able to present findings from Phase 2 too. For Phase 3, we have envisaged a quantitative study whereby we will ask a larger number of participants to keep a diary of issues affecting their well-being for a week, with the aim of (a) overcoming some of the limitations characterizing interviews and (b) testing the statistical generalizability of our findings from Phases 1 and 2.

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