

Managing Multicultural Teams in Tourism industry: Club Med Case Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to put intercultural management into perspective by trying to explore how a multicultural company in the tourism industry such as Club Med can ensure the management of a diversified workforce.

We argue that the growing diversity of the customer's characteristics and needs as well as the growing diversity of the workforce in connection with the labor's changes has contributed to the gradual integration of multicultural work teams within companies, which leads to taking this cultural diversity into account as a central element of management.

To highlight this reality, we have opted for an exploratory research that is based on a single case study of the multinational company Club Med Marrakech. The main objective was to collect the practices already implemented by this entity in order to manage its multiculturalism and to assess employees' perceptions of these practices. The data for the study was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with Club Med's HR managers and employees.

This research concluded that Club Med's employees are comprised and supportive of diversity and most of the respondents are satisfied with the measures adopted by the company to manage the heterogeneity of cultures. Our findings are expected to provide managers who are leading multicultural teams with managerial practices about how to effectively manage cultural diversity in the workplace so that they can parlay it into an advantage.

Keywords: Club Med, cultural diversity, intercultural management, multicultural teams, tourism.

JEL Classification: M54

Paper type: Empirical research

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, profound changes have been reshaping the business environment for centuries and borders inside and outside companies are becoming more and more blurred. With the internationalization of the economy, the creation of subsidiaries abroad and the development of acquisitions and alliances several companies are increasingly integrating employees from many different countries and cultures, leveraging their diversity in order to remain competitive in international markets and to get closer to customers and their needs. Therefore, they have gradually become multicultural and multilingual groups faced with a mixture of cultures that can be associated with multiple nationalities, functional backgrounds or varied work experiences. Thereby, this deep mutation requires proper strategies and management methods to avoid cultural conflict and to allow managers with multicultural teams to deal with this major risk. Indeed, when an employee integrates a company, he imports with him his socio-cultural characteristics, his own history and a set of socially acquired habits and attitudes that will guide his choices and his representations within the company (Oumarou Harou, 2014). Moreover, as it was stated by Distefano and Maznevski (2000), diverse teams tend to have either better or worse results than homogeneous teams, with more chances to have worse results than better results. The major problem that distinguishes these teams is poor management of diversity. Stahl & Maznevski (2021) proposed that cultural diversity may lead to both process gains and losses by increasing divergent processes in teams.

It is in this same sense that the importance of intercultural management takes part. Starting from this issue, our paper seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

- Which management practices and strategies are suitable for a multicultural work environment?
- How do employees perceive cultural diversity management within their company?
- What role should the human resources department play to obtain maximum efficiency from heterogeneous workforce?

Our exploratory research aims to contribute to this study path by exposing a set of managerial actions that can be used for multicultural collaborations within multinational firms. We focused on the case analyses of Club Med as a multinational entity that recruits a very diversified workforce in order to be able to target an equally diversified clientele. In that regard, Club Med adheres to a set of measures and practices to be able to manage this cultural diversity. As ClubMed today has more than 70 villages all around the world, Europe, Africa, USA, The Caribbean, South America, Southern Asia, French, Polynesia and Australia, our research will attempt to analyze the data collected from Club Med operating in Morocco and more specifically in Marrakech.

Based on a qualitative approach where semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR managers and employees working in Club Med Marrakech, this research paper presents the company's diversity management policy and evaluates the points of view of its employees towards it.

In the following sections, we will first develop the conceptual framework of our study by defining our key concepts. Next, we will explain our methodological approach and describe our data collection method. Finally, we will present our findings and we will consider research perspectives for future studies in the field of organizational diversity.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section aims to give a brief overview of the key concepts that form the basis of this paper. We will focus on defining the notions of culture, cultural diversity and multicultural work teams.

2.1. The Concept of Culture

« *Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language* » (Raymond Williams, 1976), it is characterized by its multidisciplinary and cannot be limited to a single scientific field. The word culture has a long history, its origin derives from the Latin "colere," which means cultivation and nurture, it then acquires a figurative meaning which refers to "cultivate" letters, arts or sciences. Edward Tylor was the first to approach culture from a scientific point of view. In his first work *Primitive Culture*, in 1871, he linked and joined the words "culture" and "civilization" and used them as synonyms. Thus, he gave rise to the first definition of culture: « *Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society* » (Tylor, 1871). After the anthropological aspect of culture, the sociological aspect of the term is presented as what is common and collective to a group of individuals; it includes shared values, beliefs, language and practices. The psychological approach considers culture as shared symbols, concepts and meanings. The Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede who has studied the interactions between cultures defines culture as « *mind software* » that guides us in our daily interactions. According to Hofstede, culture refers to « *the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others* » (Hofstede, 2011).

By these definitions we retain that culture is a notion that is quite difficult to define because it encompasses many concepts; however, the authors quoted above were able to agree on the fact that culture is a collective phenomenon, as it is at least partially shared with people who live or used to live in the same social environment, which is where the culture was learned or acquired. Accordingly, individuals are inevitably influenced by the cultural atmosphere they live in, at both national and organizational levels (Tian & al., 2018).

2.2. Cultural Diversity and Multiculturalism

The first research on cultural diversity began in the 1970s in the United States and focused on the study of the inequalities derived from racial-ethnic lines and gender (Zanoni et al., 2010). Subsequently, researchers became interested in the constraints faced by ethnic minorities and women in the organizational environment. The term cultural diversity generally refers to a reality of coexistence of several cultures within the same society and translates the fact that a group of individuals do not share the same ways of thinking, acting and reacting. In the professional environment, we find cultural diversity internally within work teams, but also in external relations with suppliers and collaborators (Meyer, 2011). According to Robbins (2009) organizational diversity refers to the heterogeneity of the workforce in terms of culture, gender, age, and education background. It can also be manifested through another facet including country of birth, citizenship, race and ethnicity but also language and geographic background (Ponomareva & al., 2022). In addition to these cultural dimensions, Mazur (2010) has added geographical location, work experience, income, religious beliefs and marital status.

The notion of cultural diversity is often used interchangeably with the concept of "multiculturalism" when in fact the two terms reflect different realities. As defined above, diversity concentrates on differences between individuals. When focusing on multiculturalism, the prefix multi- is apprehended in a quantitative logic, and refers to a sense of multiplicity. C. Rosado (2010) defines multiculturalism as: "*a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of different groups within an organization or society, it recognizes and values their socio-cultural differences, and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context that empowers everyone within the organization or society*". The fundamental distinction between the two terms is that

while diversity acknowledges differences among individuals, multiculturalism is a more complex concept that goes deeper as it accepts the differences and highlights on the necessity to respect them.

2.3. Multicultural Teams

We tend to believe that the terms group and team are synonymous, however, the two concepts have important differences when applied to the professional environment. Lee, (2009) considers that all teams are groups but not all groups are teams, and gave plethora of examples to distinguish the two words in his work “From group to team”. Generally, when we talk about a group, we refer to a set of individuals who have similar functions and share the same environment, but who carry out their tasks individually. Conversely, teams are task-oriented groups (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001) who are interdependent in their tasks but share collectively responsibility for their results and work together to achieve a common goal that they have participated in defining (Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Berejeb, 2016).

Based on these definitions, the primary difference between group and team is that members of a group work individually while members of a team work collectively towards the same objective.

The second difference concerns the coordination and the collaboration between the members that are absolutely necessary in work teams and not mandatory in working groups. Another difference was reported by Didier Lacombe (2017) assumes that in working groups, members often have a hierarchy contrary to work teams whose members work in a linear manner contributing their knowledge to pursuit the defined goal .

In multicultural work contexts, work teams are made up of at least three individuals from different national cultures (Loth, 2009) which refer to multicultural teams. Organizations can have multicultural teams if employees or clients come from more than one culture (Pérez, 2022). According to Zander (2012), multicultural teams are characterized by national, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity in a global environment. Halverson and Tirmizi (2008) define them as “*a collection of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems, and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries and beyond*”.

Multicultural teams can take different forms. It can be bicultural teams which are made up of two different cultures. When the number of the confronted cultures exceeds three different cultures, we talk about Multicultural teams. The more recent form of work teams that has developed with the emergence of NTIC is what we call multicultural virtual teams which consist of having people from different origins working together on a project remotely. According to Aldea (2012) multicultural virtual teams refer to “*groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed co-workers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task*”.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research tool

This study is mainly based on qualitative method and falls within the framework of a case-oriented research centered on a single case study which is the case analysis of the multinational “Club Med”.

Data was gathered based on primary and secondary sources. The main data was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews directed to two target groups. In the first place, we interviewed 3 HR managers, the purpose of the interview guide for this population was to shed light on the company’s HR practices in general, and more specifically on practices for

managing cultural diversity. Then we investigated a sample of 13 employees to identify their feelings as well as their perception of the practices implemented by the company.

All interviews took place in the company, they lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour on average and were recorded and transcribed.

Secondary sources consisted of articles and corporate reports available online related to management strategies of Club Med. This information is used as a basis in creating the conceptual framework and the analysis of data.

3.2. Research Field

The company Club Med Holding is tourism and leisure company that has been the world leader and promoter of all-inclusive holidays since 1950. As a multinational entity, and by virtue of its existence in the 4 corners of the world, Club Med therefore intends to promote diversity that is manifested in a variety of nationalities, cultures, religions, origins and backgrounds. The presence of Club Med in many countries combined with the choice of the cultural diversity of work teams required significant efforts in terms of human resources management. By dint of a very efficient multicultural management, Club Med has succeeded in managing its diversified workforce and making this multiculturalism its greatest quality and its main source of success. In 2021, Club Med was elected as a "company committed to diversity" by Capital magazine dated June 2022 (according to the annual report of Responsibility and Solidarity at Club Med). The multinational was ranked first in the "Hotels, tourism, leisure" sector (out of 83 companies). This ranking highlights its commitment to diversity and the prevention of discrimination.

3.3. Population and Sample

We recall that the objective of this study is to report on management tools to obtain maximum efficiency from multicultural teams and to verify the individual perceptions of employees towards cultural diversity management in their company. Thus, the target population of this research contains 2 groups: HR managers and employees. Globally, our sample consists of 16 individuals with different nationalities and working in different departments.

The table below describes in detail the structure of the study population.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Respondent | Age | Gender | Nationality | Function | Interview length |
|---------------|-----|--------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Respondent 1 | 41 | Man | Moroccan | HR manager | 50 minutes |
| Respondent 2 | 32 | Woman | Moroccan | HR assistant | 60 minutes |
| Respondent 3 | 40 | Man | Moroccan | Training Manager | 45 minutes |
| Respondent 4 | 50 | Woman | Moroccan | Hosting Manager | 48 minutes |
| Respondent 5 | 30 | Woman | Moroccan | Housekeeper assistant | 40 minutes |
| Respondent 6 | 42 | Woman | Moroccan | Room maid | 55 minutes |
| Respondent 7 | 34 | Woman | French | Kids Club Leader | 47 minutes |
| Respondent 8 | 22 | Woman | French | Nurse | 43 minutes |
| Respondent 9 | 27 | Man | Tunisian | Manager Meeting & Events | 60 minutes |
| Respondent 10 | 34 | Man | Senegalese | Sports Coach | 40 minutes |

| | | | | | |
|---------------|----|-------|-----------|-----------------|------------|
| Respondent 11 | 27 | Woman | French | Guest relation | 45 minutes |
| Respondent 12 | 20 | Woman | Mauritian | E-GO | 60 minutes |
| Respondent 13 | 25 | Man | French | Receptionist | 45 minutes |
| Respondent 14 | 29 | Man | Moroccan | Golf Instructor | 40 minutes |
| Respondent 15 | 24 | Man | French | Guest relation | 55 minutes |
| Respondent 16 | 22 | Man | Moroccan | kitchen clerk | 49 minutes |

Source: authors

4. Results and discussion:

As a result of content analysis obtained from collected data, it turns out that The Club Med entity is committed to a proactive approach of cultural diversity management and has a special spirit and work values that highlight the importance of cultural exchange.

In the following paragraphs, we will present in the first part the approach adopted by the company in order to manage its multiculturalism. In the second part, we will highlight the perception of employees towards it.

4.1. Cultural diversity management practices within Club Med

4.1.1. Diversity Recruiting:

The Group aims to position itself as a reference employer in all its recruiting countries. The diversity of recruitment results in a number of different nationalities represented in each village. In fact, 90% of Club Med villages welcome 9 or more nationalities among their employees. Some villages can even contain up to 25 nationalities.

Moreover, the collected data revealed that Club Med has an equal recruitment policy that is free from biases and discrimination related to origins, age or gender. Among the elements that illustrate and contribute to guaranteeing non-discrimination, we can cite the importance attached in the recruitment process to the “know how” and to the objectification of the skills associated with it. The group also requires the identification of original personalities with specific talents and universal values such as respect of others, generosity, openness and tolerance. Otherwise, in addition to these criteria, other requirements are necessary and are taken into consideration in the recruitment process in club Med; namely language skills, sense of adaptability and geographical mobility.

4.1.2. Training and Awareness Raising: The “One Team” Training

Training plays a large part in the process of integrating new employees, since each new recruit must imperatively attend training for the first seasons. “One Team” training represents one of the greatest pillars of the Club Med culture, since it encourages unity and solidarity between working teams through three main values: Alignment, Collaboration and Cooperation. This training helps employees to become aware of the importance of teamwork. All employees, regardless of their gender, age, origin or status, represent one team that interacts as a whole and shares a common objective, which is to satisfy customers. The Club is also considering language training, especially English, to be able to generalize the language even more, since the group aims to open more villages in the 5 continents and will eventually recruit a more diversified workforce, which implies the generalization of English more than the Club's mother tongue, which is French.

4.1.3. Geographical mobility:

Given the nature of its activities, the issue of international mobility is at the heart of the multinational's HR system. In fact, a mobility clause is systematically included in the contracts of international employees. This clause particularly concerns employees from Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritius, Greece, Italy and Portugal who have the necessary experience and qualifications. It allows them to work in Club Med sites in countries other than their country of origin.

Mobility at ClubMed is quite special in that an employee cannot stay more than two seasons, the equivalent of one year, in the same village. This rotation is based on quotas since the village contains 60% of locals and 40% expatriates. The 40% of expatriates are in turn dispatched in small groups of people of different nationalities. The «assignors» are responsible for the decision of affection in the sense that each assignor should make sure to insert all his teams in the villages around the world.

This mobility makes it possible to continue the development and the retention of employees by offering them the opportunity to travel and to train. In this way, cultural diversity is found in all Club Med villages in the 5 containers.

4.1.4. Inclusive organizational culture:

The Club Med's culture is rich in values of conviviality and inclusion. One of the 5 core organizational values of Club Med is “Multiculturalism” which is reflected in its desire to become a more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. The company has long been sensitive to the issue of promoting pluralism of origins and inclusion which results in its commitment to the prevention of discrimination in all its forms (disability, gender equality, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation... etc). According to Club Med's culture, and despite all the cultural mixing that exists within the company, all employees should adhere to one and unique culture, regardless of their origin, religion or beliefs, in order to be able to work in a harmonious environment, and to have a common source of values.

The company's commitments towards social inclusion are governed by agreements on “Gender Equality and Quality of Life at Work”, “Agreement against Age-based Discrimination” and “Equal Treatment related to Disabilities”.

4.1.5. Respect for national culture

The group respects and values the national culture of its host country. This initiative is taken in order to thank the host country and to allow employees to discover more about different cultures in the world. Therefore, the Club organizes a day in the week's program to highlight the culture and traditions of the host country. Everything is organized according to the theme of this culture, from the decoration, the music, the outfits, the animations, to the buffet presented. This day represents a moment of exchange and sharing for all employees, either to discover this new culture, or to talk about it and explain its history.

4.1.5. Village life

Village life consists of bringing people from totally different countries, cultural backgrounds and religions to live and work together. It includes all the moments of sharing that an employee can have with another employee or with a customer. This concerns the sharing of meals, activities and sports, the participation in the arrivals to welcome and give the first good impression to customers, the client's departures to give this moment a taste of emotion but also of conviviality, the crazy sign dances which are unique steps and music at the Club... All these shared activities represent an integral part of the Club Med culture, which aims to share exchange and to be invited to fully live the Club Med experience in the company of clients. It is in this same sense that all employees wear outfits in a harmonious way, day and night,

according to a program of the week where even customers are called upon to follow if they wish to.

The Club Med spirit also crushes any form of inter/intra-team formality to create an atmosphere of comfort and conviviality between employees in their work contexts.

4.2. Employees' perceptions of diversity management in Club Med

The analysis of employees' perceptions and experiences has shown that they share the same vision and the same ClubMed spirit, which are mainly based on sharing, conviviality, tolerance and inclusion and has revealed their appreciation of the cultural exchange created by the company.

“For me, Club Med is one of the few companies that ensures that its employees are able to work together in good conditions, and helps them learn to accept and respect others”.

The respondents perceive the Club as being a context of discovery and daily learning which allows a cultural exchange of traditions, beliefs, ideas and knowledge that they approach as an enjoyable opportunity.

Regarding training actions, all respondents have benefited from training since their hiring at the Club. “One Team” training and the values it promoted are recognized by the majority of respondents. *“The One Team training inspired me a lot and it allowed me to know how close the team should be to succeed together”.* However, proposals for language training as well as skills development training were recommended and requested from our interviewees in order to facilitate communication between the different work teams since they do not share the same origins and therefore speak different languages.

When it comes to respecting national culture, all respondents are happy to work in a company that honors the culture of the host country. For Moroccan respondents, the “Moroccan Day” is a moment of pleasure and pride because it promotes their mother culture. This day responds as well to the satisfaction of non-Moroccan respondents because it allows them to discover the culture of their host country. *“I am very satisfied with the oriental day because I was able to discover Moroccan culture, Moroccan gastronomy, couscous, tagine and lots of delicious dishes. Also I was able to see camels for the first time. It was a real pleasure that has indisputably increased my well-being at work”.*

In addition, Muslim employees feel valued when the Club gives importance to the Muslim religion through the organizational measures. The same goes for the initiatives taken by the Club regarding Ramadan since even non Muslim respondents find it a pleasure to lend a hand to their Muslim colleagues.

The question of geographical mobility has given rise to controversial opinions. Although some respondents have explicitly expressed their dissatisfaction towards the obligatory character of mobility and find it disadvantageous, in particular women for whom this mobility reflects a lack of stability as mothers of families, another category of respondents, mainly those who are single, perceives mobility as an advantage that allows them to live different experiences and confirm that they can adapt to different cultures and do not find it difficult to integrate into them.

As far as social relations are concerned, our interviewees showed their appreciation for working in uniform because it brings out a spirit of equality and helps customers to recognize easily the club's employees. They also expressed their appreciation for the lack of inter/intra-team formalities and confirm that it gives them the impression of working as a family, and helps them to approach their superior easily.

4.3. Discussion of findings

Based on the practices cited throughout our analysis, it can be inferred that the company is making great efforts to better manage the cultural differences of its human resources and to tie

diversity and inclusion to its organizational culture. These efforts are reflected in its desire to refine its recruitment process in order to integrate people who perfectly align with the ClubMed vision and help them to live and work in a diversified workplace by proposing multicultural training programs that target all employees such as the “one team training” program. Thus, we can say that training within Club Med contributes greatly to the adaptation of foreign employees, and teaches them how to work well together while embracing their differences. Furthermore, the organization of the “Moroccan day” allows foreign employees to better understand the specificities of the national culture and to open up to others in their work context. By the same token, the fact of working for a company that respects all cultures and religions but also values them makes employees feel proud to belong to it.

As to geographical mobility, it is considered as an integral part of the organizational experience within Club Med since the spirit of the company promotes cultural exchange and therefore geographical exchange. However, this practice is both an element that increases and reduces employees' sense of satisfaction with the measures adopted. This is explained by the different social commitments of employees, since some of them have declared their predisposition to leave their jobs if their family situation requires it, and have also confirmed that they do not have too much power over assignment decisions since the refusal cannot be done without a valid reason.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, the village life is a part of pure pleasure for employees and encourages increased collaboration. Our interviewees chose the words “pleasure”, “exchange” and “conviviality” to describe the village life within Club Med and consider it to be a life experience as well as a professional experience.

5. Summary and conclusion

This research work investigated the topic of managing work teams in a multicultural set up and proposed an approach to deal with people from different cultures and to take into account their specificities by focusing on the analysis of the specific case of the multinational company « Club Med ». It was a question of understanding, through semi-structured interviews, the measures adopted by our host entity to create cooperation and a common understanding between members representing different cultures. Our results were also able to illustrate that our company's employees are satisfied with the measures deployed to manage their cultural differences.

The study described in the present article contributes to the development of the instruments of intercultural management by proposing a set of measures intended for the benefit of multicultural teams' managers in order to help them take advantage of their workforce diversity. However, regarding the nature of our survey, it must be remembered that our results reflect reality as it was perceived and experienced by the actors, which explains the subjectivity of the answers obtained.

To refine this research, we believe that enlarging the size of the sample will help to develop further an in-depth understanding of the main challenges that affect teams working in multicultural contexts. Therefore, a future research agenda on multicultural management should focus on coming up with more innovative strategies to help multicultural companies improve their organizational capability to manage diversity and to avoid cultural issues in the workplace.

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