

MANAGING TRUST, COMMUNICATION, AND PERFORMANCE IN CROSS-CULTURAL VIRTUAL TEAMS THE ROLE OF CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

A Conceptual Model and Exploratory Workplace Survey

Prachi Tyagi

Sharda School of Business Studies, Sharda University, Greater Noida, India

ORCID: 0009-0000-2908-0532

ABSTRACT

This study reports an exploratory survey of employees' perceptions of cross-cultural friction and HR practices in culturally diverse workplaces. A conceptual model linking communication, trust, team performance, and Cultural Intelligence (CQ) provides the theoretical background. The survey did not directly measure trust, CQ, or team performance, and it did not measure communication effectiveness as a distinct construct. It asked about perceived communication difficulty and respondents' general views about communication and trust. The survey therefore does not test hypotheses H1–H3.

An anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 70 respondents recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Two post-hoc indices were calculated: a four-item Perceived Cultural Friction index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$) and a six-item HR Cultural-Management index ($\alpha = .91$). The modest reliability of the Friction index requires particular caution.

Spearman correlations in this sample show an association between perceived communication difficulty and perceived team impact ($\rho = .65, p < .001$), and between more frequent intercultural interaction and greater reported communication difficulty ($\rho = .65, p < .001$). The Friction index was also positively associated with the HR-practice index ($\rho = .66, p < .001$) and the overall HR-effectiveness rating ($\rho = .43, p < .001$). These are unadjusted, cross-sectional associations, not evidence of causation or of HR buffering friction. In this sample, 72.9% rated HR's overall role as effective or very effective.

The findings are descriptive and should not be generalised beyond this self-selected sample. The study is best read as a pilot motivating a larger study with validated measures and direct sampling of cross-border virtual teams, not as a confirmatory test of the conceptual model.

Keywords: Perceived Cultural Friction, HR Practices, Culturally Diverse Workplaces, Cross-Cultural Communication, Exploratory Survey, Cultural Intelligence Conceptual Model

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of remote employment has changed how companies organise and coordinate teams. Digital technology allows employees in different countries and cultural contexts to collaborate without sharing the same physical workplace. While remote work gives organisations access to a larger, more diverse talent pool, it also creates obstacles for managers seeking to build strong working relationships, both within their own organisation and with employees based in other countries or cultural contexts. A recurring example is the difficulty a manager faces in deciding how to communicate with a culturally distant employee, how to build a trusting relationship with that employee, and how to conduct a fair and meaningful performance review for someone working as part of a virtual, cross-cultural team.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) has attracted growing attention as a capability relevant to working in diverse, international environments. CQ is an individual's ability to understand a culture different from their own and to adapt their own behaviour in order to communicate and relate effectively with people from that culture. A person high in CQ tends to show greater awareness of cultural differences, adjusts their communication style depending on who they are speaking with, and is more able to build positive, trust-based relationships across cultural lines.

This study has a two-part structure, and it is important to state it plainly at the outset. The first part is theoretical: a conceptual model, developed from the literature in Section 2, proposing that communication, trust, and team performance are sequentially and reciprocally related in cross-cultural virtual teams, with Cultural Intelligence acting as a moderator. The second part is empirical: an original, exploratory survey of employees' and HR professionals' experiences of cultural difference in the workplace and of HR's role in managing it. The survey was designed as the empirical pilot informing the conceptual model. Within the practical scope of a master's dissertation it measures perceived cultural friction and organisational response rather than individual-level Cultural Intelligence, trust, or team performance directly. This study treats that gap candidly: the theoretical model (Section 2.5) supplies the study's motivation and interpretive lens, and the pilot (Sections 3–4) supplies preliminary, data-grounded insight into the dynamics the model addresses.

The empirical pilot is guided by two research questions of its own:

- RQ1. How does employees' exposure to intercultural interaction relate to their perceptions of cross-cultural friction in the workplace?
- RQ2. How is perceived cross-cultural friction related to employees' perceptions of HR's role in managing cultural difference?

Virtual teams face particular communication challenges. In face-to-face settings, team members read facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, cues that support the informal exchanges on which mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation depend. In virtual teams, members instead rely on digital channels that carry fewer of these cues, creating more opportunities for misinterpretation. Layering cultural difference on top of this compounds the difficulty: differences in language proficiency, communication style, and norms around directness or formality can make a style considered efficient in one culture appear abrupt in another.

The remainder of this study proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on communication, trust, leadership, and Cultural Intelligence in virtual and cross-cultural teams, and develops the conceptual framework and hypotheses that motivate the study. Section 3 sets out the research methodology, and Section 4 reports the survey findings. Section 5 discusses these findings, Section 6 considers their implications, Section 7 addresses limitations and sets out the follow-up study the pilot points toward, and Section 8 concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Communication and Leadership in Virtual Teams

Remote work has changed how teams function, particularly in culturally diverse settings, and cultural diversity affects team outcomes depending on how well leadership and coordination manage it (Asfahani, 2025). Digital workplaces require leaders to adapt their style to the constraints of virtual interaction, with flexible, technologically fluent leadership needed to manage culturally diverse remote teams well (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

Earlier work on virtual teams likewise identifies coordination and leadership as recurring challenges, underscoring that clear objectives and strong communication remain critical to team success regardless of setting (Malhotra et al., 2007). This concern with distance and dispersion is not new: foundational research on global virtual teams identified national diversity and geographic and electronic dispersion as structural features that shape team outcomes well before remote work became routine (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006), and distributed teams have long been shown to experience more attributional conflict than co-located teams simply because members lack the contextual information needed to interpret one another's actions charitably (Hinds & Bailey, 2003).

2.2 Trust in Virtual Collaboration

Trust is foundational to virtual collaboration. Clearly defined roles and processes help address the relational strain that distance places on a team, supporting the conditions under which trust develops (de Souza Santos & Ralph, 2022).

This literature builds on an older finding that trust in global virtual teams can form early and remain fragile, since it depends heavily on communication behaviour in the absence of the social cues co-located teams take for granted (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

2.3 Cultural Intelligence

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is consistently linked to more effective cross-cultural interaction. Individuals with higher CQ manage conflict better and adapt more effectively within global virtual teams (Johnson et al., 2025). The construct itself originates in earlier work that defined CQ as an individual's capability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organisational cultures (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004), and in the four-factor model (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural CQ) subsequently developed and validated as a measurable scale (Ang et al., 2007). Later work extended this foundation to leadership development, arguing that CQ functions as a learnable capability built through experiential learning rather than a fixed trait (Ng et al., 2009; Van Dyne et al., 2010).

2.4 Team Performance in Distributed and Innovative Contexts

Organisations have increasingly had to treat remote work as a permanent feature of operations rather than a temporary accommodation, adapting management practice to the ongoing needs of diverse, multicultural remote teams (Neeley, 2021). From an international HRM perspective, cultural differences are increasingly framed not only as a source of friction to be managed but as a potential source of complementary perspectives and creative problem-solving when organisations are deliberate about leveraging them (Stahl et al., 2017), which places a premium on the dynamic cross-cultural competencies, including CQ, that HR functions are expected to develop in globally distributed leaders and employees (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

2.5 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Drawing on Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), this study conceptualises communication, trust, and team performance as sequentially and reciprocally related, with Cultural Intelligence acting as a moderator that strengthens or weakens these relationships. Social Exchange Theory suggests that trust develops through repeated, positively reciprocated interaction, a process that depends heavily on the clarity of communication when face-to-face cues are unavailable, and one that continues to organise research on

reciprocity and relationship quality in organisational settings more broadly (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Hofstede's framework suggests that any communication act is interpreted through culturally shaped expectations about directness, hierarchy, and context, which is where Cultural Intelligence becomes relevant as a moderating capacity.

Conceptual model: Communication effectiveness → Trust among team members → Team performance, with Cultural Intelligence (CQ) moderating both links (H1, H2, H3).

On this basis, the study proposes:

- H1: Effective communication is positively associated with trust among members of cross-cultural virtual teams.
- H2: Trust among team members is positively associated with team performance in cross-cultural virtual teams.
- H3: Cultural Intelligence positively moderates the relationship between communication and trust, and between trust and team performance, such that these relationships are stronger for individuals with higher CQ.

These hypotheses describe the full conceptual model this study is ultimately concerned with; they are its theoretical motivation rather than the direct object of its empirical work. As Section 3 makes clear, the survey feasible within the scope of this dissertation, and reported in Sections 4–5, tests the relationships among perceived cultural friction, HR practice, and perceived organisational effectiveness captured in RQ1 and RQ2. The pilot provides preliminary evidence relevant to the model but does not directly test H1–H3; Section 7 outlines how a future study could test them.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study was designed around a quantitative approach: a structured questionnaire administered online and analysed statistically. The original design intended to test H1–H3 through regression and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using validated multi-item scales for communication effectiveness, trust, Cultural Intelligence, and team performance. What was ultimately administered, within the practical constraints of a master's dissertation and a convenience sample, is a shorter exploratory questionnaire measuring employees' perceptions of cross-cultural friction in the workplace and of HR's role in managing it. That instrument is best understood as the empirical pilot informing the conceptual model, and it is what is reported in Section 4, rather than the originally planned confirmatory SEM test, so that the evidence can be weighed appropriately.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population was employees and HR professionals with direct experience of culturally diverse or multinational workplaces. The questionnaire was distributed online via convenience and snowball sampling and yielded 70 responses, all of whom consented to participate and none of whom were excluded. This is well below the 150–300 respondents that a reliable SEM analysis would require, and the sample is not assumed to be representative of any wider population; it is best read as an initial, indicative pilot. By age, the sample comprised 32 (45.7%) aged 26–35, 17 (24.3%) aged 36–45, 12 (17.1%) aged 46–55, and 9 (12.9%) aged 18–25. By work experience, 29 (41.4%) reported 1–3 years of experience, 23 (32.9%) reported 4–6 years, 7 (10.0%) reported 7–10 years, and 11 (15.7%) reported less than one year. By role, 25 (35.7%) were HR professionals, 22 (31.4%) were managers or team leaders, 18 (25.7%) were employees or individual contributors, and 5

(7.1%) were senior management. By gender, 31 (44.3%) identified as male, 28 (40.0%) as female, 7 (10.0%) as non-binary or another identity, and 4 (5.7%) preferred not to say. In total, 57 (81.4%) reported having worked in a culturally diverse, multinational, or international organisation or team.

The sample therefore skews toward mid-career respondents: more than two-thirds are aged 26–55, more than half report three or more years of experience, and HR professionals and managers together account for roughly two-thirds of respondents. This is a more experienced respondent group than a typical student convenience sample, but it remains a self-selected online sample that cannot be assumed to represent any wider population of employees.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 70). Percentages are of the full sample.

Characteristic	Category	n	% of sample
Age group	18–25	9	12.9%
Age group	26–35	32	45.7%
Age group	36–45	17	24.3%
Age group	46–55	12	17.1%
Gender	Male	31	44.3%
Gender	Female	28	40.0%
Gender	Non-binary / another identity	7	10.0%
Gender	Prefer not to say	4	5.7%
Work experience	Less than 1 year	11	15.7%
Work experience	1–3 years	29	41.4%
Work experience	4–6 years	23	32.9%
Work experience	7–10 years	7	10.0%
Current role	HR professional	25	35.7%
Current role	Manager / team leader	22	31.4%
Current role	Employee / individual contributor	18	25.7%
Current role	Senior management	5	7.1%
Multinational experience	Yes	57	81.4%
Multinational experience	No	10	14.3%
Multinational experience	Not sure	1	1.4%
Multinational experience	(no answer)	2	2.9%

3.3 Instrument

The questionnaire was administered as an anonymous Google Form and contained 20 closed-ended items across five sections. Section 1 obtained informed consent. Section 2 collected demographic information: age group, gender, years of work experience, current role, and prior experience of culturally diverse, multinational, or international organisations or teams. Section 3 addressed cross-cultural workplace experience: frequency of interaction with people from other cultural backgrounds, whether cultural differences create communication difficulties, whether they influence how effectively the team works together, whether

differences in communication styles lead to misunderstandings, whether cultural differences create disagreements or conflict, and whether employees are able to discuss cultural differences openly and respectfully. Section 4 asked about HR's role: whether HR policies treat employees fairly regardless of cultural background, whether HR provides support when cultural differences create difficulties, whether HR helps employees improve communication across cultural differences, whether HR responds effectively when cultural differences contribute to conflict, whether the organisation provides opportunities to develop cross-cultural awareness, and whether HR takes cultural differences into account when developing policies and practices. Section 5 measured overall perceptions: respondents' overall rating of HR's effectiveness in managing cultural differences, and the importance they attach to effective communication for building trust in culturally diverse virtual teams.

Most items were single, purpose-written indicators on four- or five-point ordinal scales, including Likert-type agreement scales, a five-point interaction-frequency scale, a five-point numeric impact and awareness scale, a binary item on communication-style misunderstandings, and a five-point effectiveness rating, rather than items adapted from a validated multi-item Cultural Intelligence, trust, or team-performance battery.

This is a substantive departure from the instrument originally envisaged in Section 3.1, and it constrains the reliability testing and analysis the data can support (Sections 3.5–3.6).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed through professional and personal networks using an anonymous Google Form. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic purposes.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Because most items were single, purpose-written indicators rather than a validated multi-item scale, conventional construct-level validity could not be established. For interpretive purposes only, two post-hoc composite indices were built from conceptually related items: a four-item Perceived Cultural Friction index (communication difficulty Q8, team-effectiveness impact Q9, communication-style misunderstandings Q10, and conflict Q11; $\alpha = .63$, $n = 69$) and a six-item HR Cultural-Management index (fairness Q13, support Q14, communication help Q15, conflict response Q16, awareness opportunities Q17, and policy attention Q18; $\alpha = .91$, $n = 65$).

The HR index shows strong internal consistency, with all six item–total correlations between .66 and .83, and can reasonably be treated as measuring a single underlying perception of active, culturally aware HR practice. The Friction index falls below the conventional .70 threshold and is reported separately throughout, as a distinct dimension of cross-cultural workplace climate rather than as part of either index.

Adding the openness item Q12 reduced the reported Friction-index reliability to $\alpha = .07$, so Q12 is kept outside the composite.

3.6 Data Analysis Technique

Given the ordinal, mostly single-item measures and the sample size, the analysis used descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlations rather than SEM or multiple regression. Missing responses (one to four per item) were handled by pairwise deletion, so the valid sample size varies by correlation ($n = 66$ –70).

The correlations are two-tailed and their p-values are unadjusted. Table 3 contains 105 pairwise coefficients; no formal multiple-comparisons correction was applied. Individual p-

values should therefore be treated as exploratory and interpreted cautiously. The results describe associations within this self-selected sample, do not establish causation, and do not test H1–H3.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study followed standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the introductory section of the Google Form informed respondents of the study's academic purpose, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point before submission without penalty. All 70 respondents gave explicit informed consent. No personally identifying information (name, email address, or employer identity) was collected, and responses could not be traced back to individual participants. The study involved no vulnerable populations, no deception, and no more than minimal risk to participants.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Descriptive Overview

Table 2 reports the response distributions and coded descriptive statistics for the workplace items. Each ordinal scale was coded from 1 to its maximum (5 unless noted), with higher values indicating more of the attribute named: more frequent interaction (Q7), stronger agreement with each friction statement (Q8, Q11), greater perceived team impact (Q9), more reported misunderstandings (Q10), more open discussion of cultural differences (Q12), more positive ratings of each HR practice (Q13–Q18), and a more favourable overall rating of HR (Q19).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the ordinal survey items.

Item (abbreviated)	Scale	n	Mean	SD
Q7 Frequency of cross-cultural interaction	1–5	70	3.47	1.42
Q8 Communication difficulties from cultural differences	1–5	70	3.69	1.31
Q9 Cultural differences influence team effectiveness	1–5	70	3.73	1.34
Q10 Communication-style misunderstandings occur	0/1	69	0.81	0.39
Q11 Cultural differences create disagreements or conflict	1–5	70	3.86	1.18
Q12 Cultural differences discussed openly and respectfully	1–5	70	3.76	1.24
Q13 HR policies fair regardless of cultural background	1–5	70	4.03	1.08
Q14 HR provides support when differences create difficulties	1–5	70	4.01	1.14
Q15 HR helps improve cross-cultural communication	1–5	70	3.96	1.16
Q16 HR responds effectively to culture-related conflict	1–5	70	3.94	1.21
Q17 Opportunities to develop cross-cultural awareness	1–5	67	3.94	1.23
Q18 HR takes cultural differences into account in policy (corrected)	1–5	68	4.10	1.09
Q19 Overall effectiveness of HR in managing differences	1–5	69	4.25	1.03
Q20 Communication important for trust in virtual teams	1–5	68	4.21	1.13

Q10 is binary (1 = respondent agrees communication-style differences lead to misunderstandings; 0 = otherwise) and is reported as the proportion agreeing; all other

items are coded 1–5. The Q18 row was recalculated from respondent-level data ($n = 68$; 1 Strongly disagree, 4 Disagree, 19 Neutral, 7 Agree, 37 Strongly agree).

Exposure to cross-cultural interaction was high: 25 respondents (35.7%) interact with people from other cultural backgrounds always and a further 10 (14.3%) often, so half the sample works across cultural lines on a routine basis. Perceptions of the difficulty this creates were more divided: 52.9% agreed or strongly agreed that cultural differences create communication difficulties (Q8), but 18.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 28.6% were neutral. The pattern is similar for conflict (Q11): 58.6% agreed or strongly agreed that cultural differences sometimes create disagreements or conflict, while 11.4% disagreed. Misunderstandings rooted in communication style were near-universal, with 81.2% of respondents answering yes (Q10). The one clearly positive item in this section is openness (Q12): 51.4% agreed or strongly agreed that employees in their workplace can discuss cultural differences openly and respectfully, although a third (35.7%) leaned neutral or negative.

4.2 Perceptions of HR's Role

Ratings of HR's role were consistently positive across all six practice items. Majorities agreed or strongly agreed that HR policies treat employees fairly regardless of cultural background (Q13, 61.4%), that HR provides support when cultural differences create difficulties (Q14, 60.0%), that HR helps employees improve communication across cultural differences (Q15, 58.6%), that HR responds effectively when cultural differences contribute to conflict (Q16, 58.6%), that the organisation provides opportunities to develop cross-cultural awareness (Q17, 60.0% rating 4 or 5), and that HR takes cultural differences into account when developing policies (Q18, 64.7% – 1 Strongly disagree, 4 Disagree, 19 Neutral, 7 Agree, 37 Strongly agree out of 68 respondents). On the overall rating (Q19), 72.9% judged HR effective or very effective (15.7% effective, 57.1% very effective), against only 4.3% who judged it ineffective or very ineffective. Finally, the importance of communication for trust in culturally diverse virtual teams was endorsed almost unanimously (Q20): 72.1% strongly agreed and a further 14.3% agreed, with only 7.1% disagreeing.

4.3 Associations Among Key Variables

Table 3 reports Spearman correlations among the coded items and the two composite indices, with two-tailed p -values. Three patterns stand out.

First, exposure and difficulty move together rather than in opposite directions: interaction frequency (Q7) is positively correlated with perceived communication difficulty (Q8) ($\rho = 0.65$, $p < .001$). Respondents who interact across cultures more often do not report fewer difficulties from doing so. The Friction index as a whole is also strongly associated with exposure ($\rho = 0.64$, $p < .001$). Second, the Perceived Cultural Friction index is internally coherent: its components correlate positively with one another (Q8–Q9: $\rho = 0.65$, $p < .001$; Q9–Q11: $\rho = 0.54$, $p < .001$; Q8–Q11: $\rho = 0.59$, $p < .001$), consistent with the idea that communication difficulty and relational strain travel together.

Third, and least expected, the Friction index correlates positively, not negatively, with both the HR Cultural-Management index ($\rho = 0.66$, $p < .001$) and the overall rating of HR's role ($\rho = 0.43$, $p < .001$): respondents who report more cultural friction also report a more actively engaged HR function, rather than friction being lower where HR is rated more highly. The HR index and the overall rating are themselves strongly associated ($\rho = 0.64$, $p < .001$), and each individual HR practice item correlates positively with the overall rating (Q13: $\rho = .57$; Q16: $\rho = .67$; Q18: $\rho = .69$).

Table 3. Selected Spearman rank-order correlations among key items and composite indices.

Pair	ρ	Significance
Q7 Interaction frequency – Q8 Communication difficulty	0.65	$p < .001$
Q7 Interaction frequency – Friction index	0.64	$p < .001$
Q8 Communication difficulty – Q9 Team impact	0.65	$p < .001$
Q9 Team impact – Q11 Conflict	0.54	$p < .001$
Q8 Communication difficulty – Q11 Conflict	0.59	$p < .001$
Friction index – HR Cultural-Management index	0.66	$p < .001$
Friction index – Q19 Overall HR rating	0.43	$p < .001$
HR Cultural-Management index – Q19 Overall HR rating	0.64	$p < .001$
Q13 Fairness – Q19 Overall HR rating	0.57	$p < .01$
Q16 Conflict response – Q19 Overall HR rating	0.67	$p < .001$
Q18 Policy attention – Q19 Overall HR rating	0.69	$p < .001$

Note: *Cultural Friction index averages Q8–Q11 ($\alpha = .63$); HR Cultural-Management index averages Q13–Q18 ($\alpha = .91$). Pairwise $n = 66$ –70. Full pairwise correlation matrix (105 coefficients) available on request.*

5. DISCUSSION

Read alongside Section 2, these results are best understood as evidence about the salience of cross-cultural dynamics rather than a direct test of the CQ-mediated model in H1–H3. The positive association between interaction frequency and perceived difficulty ($\rho = 0.65$) runs counter to a simple contact hypothesis in which more exposure to different cultures should, by itself, ease friction. The classic intergroup-contact literature, by contrast, documents a reliable negative average effect of contact on prejudice and friction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), but it also stresses that contact works through active processes of cooperation, equal status, and institutional support rather than through mere exposure. That qualification is precisely where the present data bite: employees who work across cultures more often may simply encounter more genuine points of difference to navigate, and whether that produces trust and performance gains or persistent friction plausibly depends on an individual and organisational CQ this study was not able to measure directly. This reading is consistent with the literature reviewed in Section 2.3, in which the kind of active, adaptive capability that Cultural Intelligence describes, rather than exposure alone, converts cross-cultural contact into effective collaboration (Johnson et al., 2025). The association between exposure and reported difficulty therefore provides a preliminary indication that the CQ-moderated pathway warrants further investigation, and it motivates the validated CQ measurement proposed in Section 7.

The positive, rather than negative, association between perceived friction and perceived HR engagement ($\rho = 0.66$ with the HR index; $\rho = 0.43$ with the overall rating) is the study's most counter-intuitive finding, and it admits at least two readings. One is a salience effect: employees who experience more cross-cultural friction may also be more likely to notice, and to credit, HR's efforts to manage it, whereas employees for whom cultural difference is not salient have little basis to rate HR's role either way. The other is a common-method or extreme-response pattern, where respondents who favour extreme categories on one item tend

to do so across items, inflating the correlation independently of the underlying constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Because all constructs were measured with same-source, single-time-point self-reports, this design cannot distinguish between the two explanations; a follow-up study would address this by measuring predictor and outcome at separate time points, supplementing self-reports with other-reported or archival measures, and, where full separation is infeasible, applying marker-variable or factor-level controls. This limitation should also inform the design of the follow-up study described in Section 7.

Finally, the near-universal endorsement of the importance of communication for trust in culturally diverse virtual teams (Q20) aligns directly with the literature reviewed in Section 2.2, in which communication quality is the primary route through which trust develops among members who may never meet in person (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). That this item attracted the strongest agreement in the entire survey, in a sample two-thirds of whom had worked in culturally diverse or multinational settings, suggests the premise of the conceptual model, that communication and trust are tightly coupled in cross-cultural virtual work, is one practitioners themselves treat as given.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Implications for International HR Practice

Within the limits of an unadjusted, cross-sectional, self-reported pilot, the pattern of results offers a small number of practice-relevant observations rather than settled recommendations. Respondents rated every individual HR practice item positively: majorities agreed or strongly agreed that policy is applied fairly regardless of cultural background (Q13, 61.4%), that support is available when cultural differences create difficulties (Q14, 60.0%), that HR helps with cross-cultural communication (Q15, 58.6%), that HR responds effectively to culture-related conflict (Q16, 58.6%), that awareness-building opportunities exist (Q17, 60.0% rating 4 or 5), and that policy takes cultural difference into account (Q18, 64.7%). The overall effectiveness rating was higher still, at 72.9% effective or very effective (Q19). Read together with the strong internal consistency of the HR Cultural-Management index ($\alpha = .91$), this is evidence that, in this sample, employees perceive HR's cultural-management activity as a coherent and largely well-regarded bundle of practices, not a set of unrelated initiatives.

The positive association between perceived friction and perceived HR engagement ($p = .66$ with the HR index) should be interpreted cautiously before drawing any practical conclusions. As Section 5 discusses, this is at least as consistent with a salience effect as with any buffering effect of HR practice on friction. International HR functions should therefore not read this pilot as showing that current practice is reducing friction; the honest reading is that active, visible HR engagement and reported friction tend to co-occur in the same respondents, for reasons this design cannot separate. A practical implication that does follow more directly from the descriptive results is that the weakest-scoring HR item in the set, awareness-building opportunities (Q17, though still rated positively on balance), together with the more mixed rating of open, respectful discussion of cultural differences among colleagues (Q12, 51.4% positive but 35.7% neutral), are the two areas where this sample's HR perceptions are least uniformly positive, and are reasonable candidates for closer attention pending a larger, validated follow-up study.

6.2 Implications for Leadership

The clearest leadership-relevant finding is the positive association between how often employees interact across cultural lines and how much communication difficulty they report (Q7–Q8, $\rho = .65$). Section 5 situates this against the intergroup-contact literature, where

exposure alone is not expected to reduce friction unless it is accompanied by cooperative, equal-status conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and against the Cultural Intelligence literature, where it is the active, adaptive capability CQ describes, rather than exposure by itself, that is associated with more effective cross-cultural collaboration (Johnson et al., 2025). For leaders of cross-cultural virtual teams, the findings suggest that frequent cross-cultural contact may create coordination demands that require active management rather than resolving automatically over time. This reading is offered cautiously: the survey did not measure leadership behaviour, individual CQ, or team performance, so it cannot show which leadership practices would convert exposure into trust, only that exposure and difficulty were not inversely related in this sample.

The near-unanimous endorsement of the importance of communication for building trust in culturally diverse virtual teams (Q20, 86.4% agree or strongly agree) is better read as a statement of practitioner belief than as evidence about what actually happened in respondents' own teams; no item asked directly about respondents' own virtual-team communication practices or trust levels. It nonetheless indicates that the premise underlying H1 in the conceptual model, that communication quality matters for trust in this setting, is one leaders and HR professionals in this sample already treat as self-evident, which may make it easier to secure buy-in for communication-focused leadership development than for other interventions this pilot cannot speak to directly.

6.3 Implications for Organisational Policy

Two descriptive results bear on policy design, both with the same caveat: they describe associations in a self-selected sample of 70, not effects that have been tested against a comparison condition. First, the six HR-practice items cohere strongly ($\alpha = .91$) and correlate strongly with the overall effectiveness rating (Q13: $\rho = .57$; Q16: $\rho = .67$; Q18: $\rho = .69$), suggesting that, in this sample, employees do not evaluate fairness, support, communication assistance, conflict response, awareness-building, and policy attention as separate concerns but as a single perceived orientation toward cultural difference. A policy implication worth testing in a larger study, rather than adopting outright, is that a coordinated cultural-management approach across these six areas may matter more to employee perception than strength in any single area.

Second, the pilot cannot show that any specific policy lowers friction, and the positive friction–HR correlation argues against reading high friction scores as evidence that policy is failing. What the data more defensibly support is a monitoring recommendation: because interaction frequency and reported difficulty rise together, organisations expanding cross-border or cross-cultural virtual staffing should expect reported friction to rise with it, and should track HR-practice ratings and friction indicators together rather than treating a rise in reported friction alone as a sign that HR policy needs to change. Any firmer policy recommendation would require the validated, multi-item, longitudinal design set out in Section 7.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study's design carries several limitations that should inform how its findings are read. Most importantly, the survey measures perceived cultural friction and HR practice rather than individual Cultural Intelligence, trust, or team performance directly, and although Q20 addresses trust-building in culturally diverse virtual teams, the survey does not ask respondents about their own team's virtual or remote working arrangements specifically; it therefore speaks to the conceptual model in Section 2.5 only indirectly, and H1–H3 as originally specified remain untested by this data. Second, all constructs were measured with

single, purpose-written items rather than validated multi-item scales, which is why the post-hoc composite indices in Section 3.5 should be treated cautiously, and why the Friction index ($\alpha = .63$) falls below the conventional reliability threshold even as the HR index ($\alpha = .91$) comfortably clears it.

Third, the achieved sample of 70 respondents was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling and cannot be assumed to represent a wider population. HR professionals and managers made up about two-thirds of respondents, so the findings describe this self-selected group rather than employees generally. Fourth, the self-reported, cross-sectional design cannot establish direction or causation. Fifth, the correlation analysis contains 105 pairwise coefficients and no multiple-comparisons adjustment was applied; all p-values are unadjusted and should be treated as suggestive.

These pilot findings raise questions for further research rather than establish policy prescriptions. Respondents generally rated HR's cultural-management practices positively, and the friction index was positively associated with HR ratings. This does not show that HR activity reduces friction; salience, common-method response, or reverse direction may also explain the association. Any practice recommendations require replication with a larger, more representative sample and validated measures.

This survey did not measure leadership behaviour or virtual-team outcomes directly, so it cannot identify leadership practices that cause trust or performance. Many respondents endorsed the importance of communication for trust in culturally diverse virtual teams, but this is a reported perception, not evidence that communication improved trust or performance in their own teams. Communication clarity and respectful discussion are reasonable topics for follow-up research, not effects established by this pilot.

Within this sample, the findings tentatively point to questions about fair HR practices and whether employees can discuss cultural differences respectfully. They do not establish that a particular policy is effective. These possibilities should be tested in a larger and more representative study before broad recommendations are made.

These limitations define the follow-up study that this pilot points toward. The proposed study would recruit 150–300 employees working in explicitly virtual or hybrid, cross-border teams; measure communication effectiveness, trust, Cultural Intelligence, and team performance with validated multi-item instruments, including the E-CQS for CQ (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007) and a trust scale adapted for virtual-team research along the lines of Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999); and analyse the data with SEM or moderated regression capable of directly testing H1–H3, including the CQ-moderation path. Sampling would target distributed virtual workers rather than office-based employees, so that the virtual-specific communication dynamics the model describes are actually represented in the data. Where feasible, predictor and outcome measures would be separated in time or sourced from different respondents to mitigate common-method bias. Longitudinal or experience-sampling designs would further help establish whether the associations found here reflect genuine developmental processes or a snapshot of a particular, self-selected group of respondents. This study provides a foundation for that programme of research.

CONCLUSION

This study explored employee perceptions of cultural friction and HR practices in culturally diverse workplaces and presented a broader conceptual model involving communication, trust, team performance, and Cultural Intelligence. The survey directly examined perceived friction and HR practice, not trust, CQ, team performance, or communication effectiveness as

separate validated constructs. H1–H3 remain untested. Within this self-selected sample of 70, greater intercultural interaction was associated with greater reported communication difficulty, and friction was positively associated with HR ratings. These unadjusted associations are exploratory; the Friction index had modest reliability ($\alpha = .63$), and the cross-sectional design cannot establish causation or generalisability.

The study is therefore best understood as a pilot motivating a larger study, not as confirmation of the conceptual model, and the correlation tests should be read as unadjusted exploratory results. Further research should use a larger, more balanced sample, validated measures of communication, trust, CQ, and team performance, and direct sampling of cross-border virtual teams. Such a design could test H1–H3 without overstating what this survey establishes.

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