

## Stay Committed

### On the Role of Organizational Commitment for Virtual Collaboration in SMEs

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**Abstract**— The COVID-19 pandemic intensified virtual collaboration, which is equally crucial and challenging for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Our paper investigates the role organizational commitment plays for virtual collaboration and identifies how organizational commitment can be sustained in virtual collaboration in the unique context of SMEs. Participants in the research included 15 members of virtual teams within SMEs, employed in knowledge work. We found that organizational commitment is of great importance in virtual collaboration in SMEs. Our findings suggest that organizational commitment is only established in physical collaboration, but it can be maintained in virtual collaboration. Our initial findings serve as a starting point for further research on organizational commitment in virtual collaboration. Implications for practitioners as well as the research community are discussed.

**Keywords** – *virtual collaboration; organisational commitment; SMEs; qualitative research.*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The crisis-driven digital transformation of work i.e., the enforced digital transformation induced by the COVID-19 pandemic [1][2], has led to the fact that location-independent collaboration became a standard practice [3][4]. Although working from home is no longer enforced, many organizations are discussing whether and to what extent virtual collaboration should be continued in the future [5]. While many advantages of virtual collaboration for employees (e.g., improved work-life-balance), teams (e.g., spontaneous collaboration possibilities) and organizations (e.g., greater productivity and shorter development times)

occurred [e.g., [6][7]], the pandemic highlighted also many challenges of virtual collaboration starting with poor internet connectivity and ending with decreasing organizational commitment of employees [8][9].

The crisis-driven digital transformation offers unique opportunities, especially for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). For example, through virtual collaboration, SMEs can draw on qualified specialists regardless of where they live, which addresses the problem of the shortage of skilled workers [10][11]. Since SMEs are basically facing a shortage of resources, they can reduce transfer time and costs as well as travel expenses through virtual collaboration [12][13].

Research on virtual collaboration indicates that it requires formalized structures and coordination to moderate unavoidable turbulences and unpredictability occurring in virtual collaboration [14][15]. Pierce and Hansen [16] argue that adherence to structures and scheduled videoconferences are also important to increase trust within the team and strengthen virtual collaboration. Furthermore, communication and the exchange of personal information are essential and have to be fostered in virtual collaboration [14][15].

SMEs tend to be informal structured and rather lack development of internal communication instruments [17]. Rather than formal structures, personal collaboration is characteristic of SMEs – resulting in greater involvement and visibility. For this reason, employees of SMEs have a higher organizational commitment than employees of larger companies [18], not least because informal and personal communication is a regular part of their daily work. However, SMEs also depend on the organizational

commitment of their employees, as this ensures that employees are not poached because of resources that SMEs cannot offer [18].

This brings up the interesting conundrum of how meaningful organizational commitment is in virtual collaboration and how organizational commitment is affected by the tension between physical and virtual collaboration in SMEs. Therefore, our research aims to answer the following Research Question (RQ): Which role does organizational commitment play for virtual collaboration in SMEs and how can it be sustained?

Our paper is structured as follows: Firstly, the theoretical background on virtual collaboration and organizational commitment in SMEs is briefly examined. Secondly, the methodological approach is described, and the findings of our research are presented. Finally, we conclude with discussing potential implications to theory and practice and identify the limitations of our work as well as further research outlook.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### A. Virtual Collaboration

Collaboration, according to Briggs et al. [19], describes one level of teamwork. Collaboration refers to the interaction of individuals within a team to create value that individual members could not achieve through individual effort [19, 20]. Thus, the sum of the performance of all individuals and of the team as a whole are essential for the success of the team [20]. Collaboration can be understood as a collective effort to achieve a team goal [21][22]. Collaboration consists of a number of dimensions, such as trust [23], communication [24] and coordination [25].

With physical collaboration being a process where team members collaborate face-to-face, virtual collaboration is a collaboration process in which team members primarily work together virtually [26]. According to Peters & Manz [27] virtual collaboration transcends time and space, connects people from various organizations, functions and disciplines, and connects all team members' abilities.

### B. Organizational Commitment in SMEs

According to Mowday et al. [28], organizational commitment can be defined as "1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization". Organizational commitment refers to the relative emotional intensity of employees' identification with their organization [29] and the decision of an employee to continue working with their organization [30]. The concept is closely associated with employee turnover, absenteeism and performance [28][31]. Levels of commitment can also affect employees' effort, attitudes and behaviors, levels of job satisfaction, and eventually firm performance [e.g., [32]-[35]]. Compared to job satisfaction, commitment is considered to be more ingrained, robust, and long-term than job satisfaction [36].

Particularly to SMEs organizational commitment challenges are pertinent, since their performance depends on their ability to use the discretion of a relatively limited number of employees [18][37]. This can be of special importance considering the limited resources they can offer their employees compared to larger organizations [18].

## III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To achieve a comprehensive and in-depth insight into the influences of organizational commitment on virtual collaboration, we applied an inductive, qualitative approach [38]. Therefore, unstructured interviews with open-ended questions with 15 interviewees took place over a period of 4 months. A list of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

The interviewees were between 26 and 56 years old at the time of data collection, with an average age of 35 years. 8 of the interviewees stated that they were female and 7 defined themselves as male. All interviewees worked predominantly remotely and were employed in the field of knowledge work. The organizations to which the interviewees belonged were located in Germany and employed less than 250 employees and can therefore be defined as SMEs [39].

TABLE I. INTERVIEW PARTNERS

ID	Industry	Job title	Age	Gender
O1-I1	IT	Founder	26	male
O1-I2	IT	Software Developer	45	male
O1-I3	IT	Software Developer	30	male
O2-I1	Consulting	CEO	48	female
O2-I2	Consulting	Consultant Supply Chain	31	female
O2-I3	Consulting	Consulting Supply Chain	27	female
O3-I1	Software	Talent Acquisition Manager	29	male
O4-I1	IT	Customer Success Manager	28	female
O4-I2	IT	Customer Success Manager	35	male
O4-I3	IT	Head of Customer Service	32	female
O5-I1	IT	Software Developer	28	male
O5-I2	IT	COO	34	female
O6-I1	Construction	CEO	56	male
O6-I2	Construction	Architect	32	female
O6-I3	Construction	Architect	31	female

We used an open-ended, semi-structured guideline [40], which conformed to Sarker's guidelines for qualitative research [40][41]. We conducted three preliminary interviews before the first version of the questionnaire was refined. Only minor changes had to be made to the interview guide. We then recorded the interviews and afterwards transcribed them verbatim and anonymized. We analyzed the transcribed files using MAXQDA software. First, we independently applied open coding [42][43]. Subsequently, axial codes were formed by comparing and grouping the open codes [42]. In a final step, the axial codes were grouped by subject (i.e., selective coding). The analysis ended with saturation.

#### IV. FINDINGS

We were able to identify three main grounding findings. Firstly, organizational commitment is still and even more of high relevance for employees when working remotely. Remote work has different requirements than continuous work in the office, which makes committing to the organization even more necessary. Secondly, organizational commitment only appears to be established in direct contact, i.e., when the employees are onsite in the office. However, we also found factors that enhance organizational commitment, which are sustained in remote work using formal and informal practices and routines. Our third finding is thus that organizational commitment can be maintained to a certain degree in virtual collaboration.

##### A. Organizational Commitment is Still and Even More Relevant in Remote Work

Organizational commitment is generated by a variety of (ultimately very individual) factors. These range, for example, from adequate communication and trust to participation and the feeling of being heard. The factors mentioned are often associated with attitudes and self-perception of managers, which are first of all location-independent. Thus, it is clear that organizational commitment has relevance in the remote work setting and that it is of great importance to foster communication among the employees.

*The personal fit is definitely crucial, meaning that you somehow have the feeling that you can identify with the values and goals of the organization [...], you feel like you belong. You have certain points that you would like to address: Push forward, change. And you are given the opportunity to do so [...] That certainly contributes to the feeling of belonging. I don't really see a difference [remotely in contrast to onsite] (O2-I4).*

*In my opinion, the fact that people stay in the company depends mainly on [...] whether they are appreciated. [...] How can you appreciate remotely? Through communication and by telling employees that they have done a great job. (O1-I2)*

Beyond location-independent factors, there are situations where organizational commitment plays an even more important role remotely than onsite. When employees are not physically working in the company, for instance, there are modified control mechanisms that are subconsciously and implicitly in place when they are working in the office - for example, from supervisors to employees or even between employees. In addition, the range of potential jobs is greater in remote work. In this context, interviewees name organizational commitment as an important instrument for employee bonding in virtual collaboration.

*You never know [...] what the person is really doing at home. Theoretically, they could also make a call with a*

*potential employer, with a headhunter [...], and simply ask for a new offer [...]. That's why I think it's important to make sure that such a scenario simply doesn't happen, but that you feel like you belong to a club so strongly that you have no interest in being poached (O1-I1).*

*Here in my current work [...] for example it is working well, because we have this constant contact and there are real people I am working with. But when it is remote work with people I only have contact with via email, I don't have the feeling that I let anyone down and [...] I would not feel guilty if I just cut off the cooperation (O6-I2)*

##### B. Organizational Commitment only Establishes in Onsite Work

Based on the interviews, we derive that the concept of organizational commitment is closely linked to team cohesion and team trust and cannot be considered separately. Planned onsite days for team events or to meet colleagues are considered important. Interviewees often critically reflect that it is difficult to maintain their commitment to the organization virtually and that the development of organizational commitment requires direct interaction with colleagues within the organization.

*In order to really strengthen this bond 100%, I think [...] that you have to see each other physically [...]. This is only possible up to a certain degree [remotely]. (O1-I1)*

The interviews show that the factors to which interviewees ascribe the development of organizational commitment can only be established through personal contact. Communication between colleagues is highlighted as central and small talk and private conversations in particular are considered elementary for the sense of belonging.

*The lack of face-to-face communication, this is missing. It's a different feeling and people don't have that bonding, that brotherhood. [...] in between or during lunch break, we talk about other things and so on. When we work from home or remotely, that doesn't happen. (...) The identification with the company does not exist. (O1-I3)*

Face-to-face communication is perceived as more natural than virtual meetings could represent. In this context, one issue lies in the currently prevailing work culture, which does not intend room for small talk in remote work. This makes it difficult to establish private dialogue in virtual collaboration that does not seem forced.

*When I come into the office daily and see someone, I have a quick chat and ask them: "Hey, how's life and how's the travel planning going?" or "How's the house-building going?" or whatever. It's easy because you see each other and just make small talk. But small talk remotely is very difficult, because it is always seen as a waste, always seen as not efficient. I don't call my colleague and say, "Hi, I have to ask, how's your house-building going?" That would*

*actually seem a bit bizarre if I were to do that. How do I get this small talk into it [remote work] without it seeming so forced? (O2-I1)*

*Communication is not as fluent as when you are in the office in person and have your colleagues sitting right next to you [...]. In my opinion, you will never achieve the same level of interaction between employees. In other words, you will never achieve the same quality (O3-I1).*

Various routines lay the foundations for the onsite organizational commitment. These are informally found between employees and include private small talk and shared humor, coffee, or office grapevine.

*Small talk is missing remotely. Making a little joke, going to the coffee machine together. I'm a non-smoker, but going out for a smoke together, for example. [...] It's just not possible remotely. (O1-I2)*

On the organizational side, there are formal routines enhancing organizational commitment. In this context, interviewees mention workshops in person, team events, joint participation in sporting events and annual 'workations'.

*What we also like to do is participating in sport events as a team, as an entire company. And then it's also part of it that we always design our t-shirts ourselves in advance and we don't hand it over to an agency, but we really do it together as a team, think of cool things and then apply them. That's part of it. [...] And of course that also helps people to identify with the company in some way. (O2-I4).*

### C. Organizational Commitment can be Maintained in Virtual Collaboration

The interviews show that organizational commitment is formed in presence. However, if employees are equipped with a certain amount of organizational commitment (from onsite work), this can be maintained in virtual collaboration. This requires more explicit routines and structures than in work onsite.

*I think you need more structures remotely. Well, you need structures, you need processes, and if those are there and if they are clear and everyone can stick to them, then I believe that on the one hand you have a certain freedom, a certain flexibility that you can offer your employees, and on the other hand they also know exactly what they have to do and how in order to fulfill or meet the requirements. And I do believe that the employees are then particularly loyal because they can combine freedom and work wonderfully with each other (O4-I3).*

In addition, the availability of remote work can lead to the strengthening of organizational commitment due to the improved work-life balance and the associated feeling of "being understood by the organization". Interviewees see the

advantages of virtual collaboration and value the freedom it offers.

*This freedom of working hybrid helps them to feel more fulfilled in their personal lives because they are able to maintain that balance and that directly contributes to the engagement to the company, because they feel like "my company understands me and provides me the flexibility". (O5-I2)*

In order to maintain organizational commitment in virtual collaboration, organizations strive for various routines that are intended to maintain organizational commitment. Interviewees mention, among others, participation in the form of holistic task responsibility or tools that enable transparency about company internals remotely.

*I am part of the company and not just an employee. Yes, we do remote work but what I say in the company has an impact. I am not just the employee doing my tasks. I own a part, maybe not financially, but [...] in the direction of technology, for example. There are my tasks and if I say that something doesn't work that is also listened to. (O1-I3)*

*There is a 'virtual deal bell' where everyone gets an email from HubSpot. It's automated with confetti when you open it, "the customer has now signed the project here, we've just made €150,000 in sales". (O1-O1)*

Further routines identified from the interviews are related to communication and trust among employees. For instance, team meetings are planned on a regular basis or a periodical 1:1 appointment with the supervisor is set up in order to have the opportunity to directly address any problems that would disappear unseen in virtual collaboration. Other routines included the scheduling of specific times for private small talk or inviting employees at weekly cross-company meetings to share moments of their private life.

*At the jour fixe [...] we always have five minutes to arrive. Where we just chat privately. [...] It doesn't feel forced anymore if you keep it really simple like that. (O2-I1)*

*So every Monday morning, the CEO or me, we talk a little bit about the company, what was happening, funding and then two or three people [...] can talk about their hobbies, their wedding, whatever they want to, anything from their personal life they are comfortable sharing with. I had also given the chance to people who are shy, that they can write a blog post. [...] You get to see so much about the people. [...] It gives you points to talk to that person, you build a connection. (O5-I2)*

However, it becomes apparent that maintaining organizational commitment virtually requires much more effort and consciousness than onsite. Whereas in the office, managers or employees can notice directly in personal contact when problems, dissatisfaction or demotivation arise, this aspect requires more time and effort in virtual collaboration.

*That's challenging, really understanding where the needs are, where the problems are. Are they suffering, is their mental health fine? Are they stressed? You can ask these questions, but you have to spend time to build a relationship for that person to open up and really talk about it. Otherwise, I can go and ask but people assume nothing is wrong. You can see and sense something is wrong. That building, that takes a lot of effort and time in remote work versus when you are in the office. You can go for lunch or have a smoke and they can discuss these things far more easily. Making it work remotely I would say this effort is a lot more. So, people have to put conscious effort in this. This itself is a challenge. (O5-12)*

## V. DISCUSSION

We conducted a qualitative study to shed light on the context of organizational commitment and virtual collaboration in SMEs. To answer our proposed RQ we can say that organizational commitment appears to be highly relevant in the virtual collaboration context. We also found that the development of organizational commitment has to take place onsite, as it depends on face-to-face communication, trust between employees and team cohesion. However, organizational commitment can though be maintained in virtual collaboration. Our findings suggest that more effort and mindfulness are necessary to sustain organizational commitment in virtual collaboration, but is still possible, when planned and executed in a structured manner.

While organizational commitment is a widely studied field, it has not yet received much attention in the context of virtual collaboration in SMEs. By interviewing 15 employees, we were able to provide initial insights and derive implications for both, theory, and practice.

Our findings are important to theory, as we contribute to the organizational commitment literature by looking at organizational commitment in virtual teams. The fact that organizational commitment is created onsite and can be maintained in virtual collaboration provide important indications of the origins of organizational commitment. We were thus able to transfer established findings to a modern working context. This will enable future research to discover new entry points and advance research in this so far little-studied field. Beside the organizational commitment literature, our initial findings may be starting points in the field of virtual collaboration. The understanding that organizational commitment can be maintained virtually provides insight into how virtual collaboration in SMEs should be designed to strengthen the attachment of employees to the organization.

In addition, we were able to derive implications for practice. We underlined the importance of organizational commitment for virtual collaboration in SMEs. Practitioners should therefore initially focus on creating awareness in the organization. For SMEs virtual collaboration provides a competitive advantage to recruit skilled workers. Here they should take action to support the maintenance of organizational commitment in virtual collaboration e.g., allocating financial or personnel resources.

Our research supports SMEs with measures to successfully build and maintain organizational commitment (virtually). SMEs should focus on giving employees sufficient opportunity and reason to build organizational commitment onsite and establish structured opportunities to maintain organizational commitment in virtual collaboration.

As with every research, our research comes with limitations, which invite future research to build on. Firstly, we conducted qualitative research where the typical limitations of qualitative studies are included (e.g., weak internal validation). Future research could use quantitative research, where concrete measures of organizational commitment could be applied and quantitatively tested. Further, the size of our sample gives cause to limitation. In addition to a larger sample size, it would also be interesting to conduct further research using a case study design between different SMEs and thus taking different employee groups into account. A comparison with larger companies could also yield interesting findings. Ultimately, our research can only serve as an initial starting point for linking organizational commitment and virtual collaboration. Further research should explore in more depth which factors of virtual collaboration (e.g., communication, trust, coordination) influence organizational commitment in SMEs and how.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the role of organizational commitment for virtual collaboration in SMEs. This was achieved by conducting 15 unstructured interviews yielding new insights into how organizational commitment can be sustained in virtual collaboration. The findings suggest that organizational commitment is built only in physical collaboration but can be sustained in virtual collaboration. This paper provides an important starting point for future research on virtual organizational commitment and provides important insights for practitioners.

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