

# Soft Skills to Enhance Team Performance: A Systematic Review of Diverse Teamwork

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**Abstract:** In today's world, when reviewing business trends and key themes alongside the latest academic studies in the field of team dynamics, two significant trends overshadow all others. On the one hand, soft skills are increasingly recognised as essential drivers of both employees' personal growth and organisations' success by both business leaders and academic scholars. On the other hand, due to globalisation, team structures have shifted from being more homogeneous to more diverse, leading to the formation of multicultural teams. However, reviewing the existing literature reveals there is a lack of studies on the role of soft skills in culturally diverse work environments. Indeed, most research in the context of soft skills mainly examined the role of these skills in academic settings among students or within homogenous workplace settings. This paper addresses the research question: "How do soft skills influence team performance and help address challenges within multicultural teams?" using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Initially, we extracted approximately 1100 papers which have been published since 2014 from valid databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 19 papers were found relevant and selected for this review. Then, a thematic analysis approach was used to synthesise findings from the selected papers. This enabled us to identify key soft skill categories, their definitions, and reported impacts on multicultural team dynamics. Through this study, a broad range of soft skills explicitly or implicitly discussed in the literature were identified, with particular emphasis on four core soft skills, communication, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and adaptability, as essential for enhancing effectiveness in multicultural teams. The identified soft skills were found to improve team interaction, collaboration and trust as well as reduce conflicts within culturally diverse work environments.

**Keywords:** Soft skills, Globalisation, Team dynamics, Multicultural teams, Team performance

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## 1. Introduction

Globalisation is often understood as a phenomenon in which nations are becoming more connected in the global economy through increased interaction between people, flow of information, technological development, and cultural blending (Li and Reuveny, 2003). Considering the migration statistics for the past two decades, the increasing pace of globalisation can be understood more clearly. From 2000 to 2020, international migration reached 281 million, demonstrating an increase of nearly 110 million (United Nations, 2020). Further supporting this, just in the case of the UK, the number of granted work visas has increased by 130% since 2019 (Home Office, 2024). As a result, in today's workplaces, teams within organisations and projects have become more diverse, creating teams consisting of representatives of various cultures (Szipilko et al., 2022).

One of the key characteristics of multicultural teams (MTs) is the presence of cultural differences among members known as cultural gap. These differences can be better understood through Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which outlines six key value patterns across societies. These dimensions influence how individuals with various national and cultural backgrounds relate to authority, deal with uncertainty, balance group and individual interests, or even define emotional and social roles (Hofstede, 2011). In a team context, this means that members may approach communication, collaboration, and decision-making in different ways. While this heterogeneity is often celebrated as a driver of creativity and innovation, it can equally give rise to misunderstandings, conflicts and a lack of trust (Bouncken *et al.*, 2016; Gross-Gołacka and Martyniuk, 2024). Thus, cultural diversity is often identified as a double-edged sword in the context of team effectiveness (Stahl et al., 2010).

Meanwhile, soft skills which often refer to a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies are increasingly considered as the main driver for the effectiveness and performance of the organisation (Robles, 2012; Cimatti, 2016). Indeed, these skills are recognised not only as an impactful competency in the quality of people's interaction but also as their ability to manage and understand their own and others' feelings and emotions (Laker & Powell, 2011). These skills include a vast range of individual skills such as communication,

leadership, creative thinking, and problem-solving, supplementing the technical skills in contributing towards professional accomplishment (Cimatti, 2016; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025).

Therefore, as organisations increasingly rely on culturally diverse teams due to globalisation and technological advancement, the dynamics between team members and the soft skills required to navigate them have grown in complexity and importance. In such work settings, soft skills become not just valuable but essential. However, in the absence of comprehensive studies or systematic literature reviews on this topic, this study seeks to explore the role of soft skills in diverse teams' (e.g., global virtual teams, MTs) processes and outcomes through addressing the following research questions:

*RQ1: Which soft skills are most commonly discussed in literature in the MTs context?*

*RQ2: How do these core soft skills influence team performance and help address challenges within MTs?*

## 2. Methodology

This study used thematic analysis to structure and analyse the existing research on the role of soft skills in culturally diverse workplaces by following a transparent methodology to search and examine the relevant studies. Based on inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1), all relevant studies were collected through a search of Scopus and Web of Science. Google Scholar was also used as a supplementary source to capture grey literature.

**Table 1: Search String**

Databases	Search String
Scopus	("soft skills" OR "interpersonal skills" OR "intrapersonal skills" OR "socio-emotional skills")
Web of Science	AND ("multicultural teams" OR "cross-cultural teams" OR "diverse teams" OR "cultural diversity" OR "global teams")

### 2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To narrow the broader topic and to be able to extract more reliable, and relevant studies, inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study is designed as follow:

**Table2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Characteristic	Inclusive	Exclusive
Context	Soft Skills in Multicultural Workplace	Documents which do not include Soft Skills in Multicultural Workplace Documents which focus on soft skills in academia
Type	Journal articles	Magazine Systematic reviews papers Reports Books Proceeding papers
Time	2014–2025	Before 2014
Language	English	Non-English
Availability	Open-access or accessible through institutional access	Access denied or chargeable

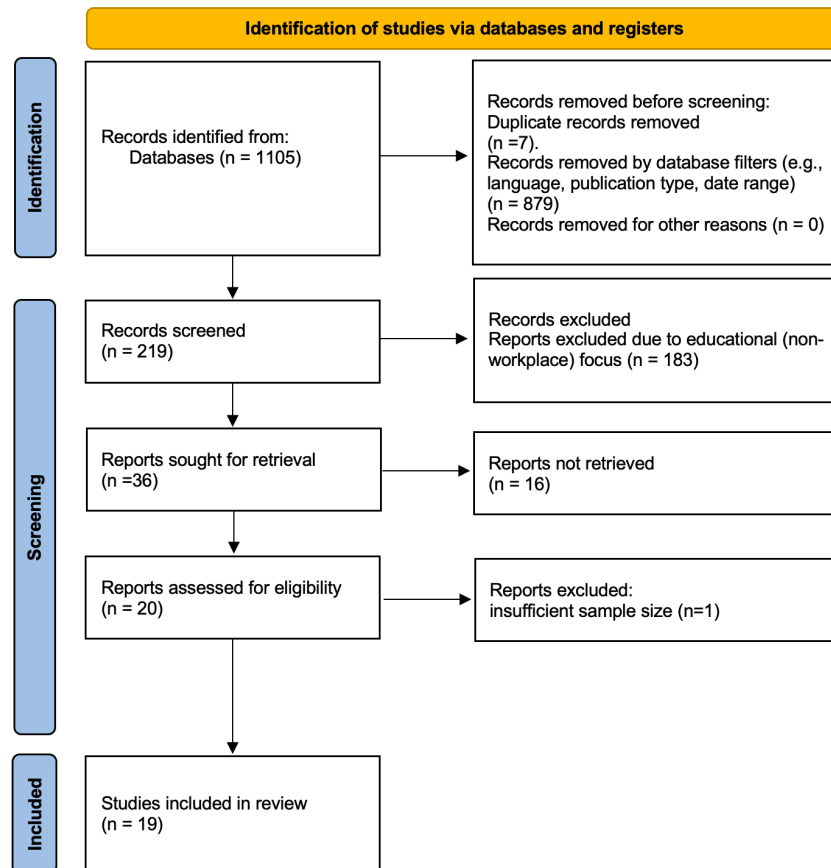


Figure 1: Paper selection process (PRISMA Flowchart)

### 3. Results

The included articles Table 3 (see Appendix) have been organised in this study to identify the essential soft skills and their role in culturally diverse teams. In this regard, we identified four key soft skills crucial for effective MTs' performance: communication, emotional Intelligence, cultural Intelligence and adaptability.

#### 3.1 Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is defined as "the individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations". It entails a set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that help individuals understand different cultural contexts and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Key components of CQ include cognitive understanding of cultural norms, motivational openness and curiosity, and behavioural flexibility to bridge cultural gaps (Earley & Ang, 2003).

The included papers in this study reveal that a higher level of CQ directly contributes to building trust, better knowledge sharing, and team performance in culturally diverse teams. Thirteen out of nineteen reviewed studies have discussed the role of CQ explicitly or implicitly which clearly shows its effective role in multicultural work environments, emerging as a crucial soft skill for both team members and leaders.

Stoermer et al. (2020) in their study which includes 1300 expatriates across 30 host countries, found that higher levels of CQ not only enhanced organisational embeddedness significantly but also improved knowledge-sharing behaviours among members. They found that culturally intelligent individuals were more likely to feel psychologically and socially integrated within their host organisations and this led to exchanging valuable knowledge with their colleagues. Their findings suggest that CQ not only influences interpersonal functioning but also plays a key role in how deeply expatriates connect with their organisations and how effectively they contribute to team knowledge dynamics.

Expanding the discussion to team-level outcomes, Afsar et al. (2020) further examine the role of CQ in diverse teams within multinational companies in Saudi Arabia. They found that individuals with high CQ demonstrate better performance when faced with cultural differences and are also highly motivated to engage and make significant contributions to their work. They found that both the level of work engagement and

trustworthiness among team members would mediate the effect of CQ on innovative work behaviour. Nevertheless, the research mainly highlights that CQ contributes not only to cultural adaptability but also to psychological safety and creativity, which in general, aligns closely with the broader literature on soft skills in MTs.

Furthermore, Mammadov and Wald (2025) in study of SME owner-managers introduced CQ as one of the essential skills for owner-managers. They found that leaders with a high CQ level demonstrated a better ability to navigate uncertainty, engage in risk-taking, and adapt to multicultural contexts. Moreover, higher levels of CQ among owner-managers have also significantly enhanced their degree of internationalisation, and this is maximised particularly when supported by managers' global mindset (GM). Indeed, similar to what Adamovic (2017) discussed, they have also highlighted the role of GM as a mediating factor. Although GM is defined as the people's ability to manage complex business environments across national boundaries effectively, this definition lacks specificity in both studies as it is not clear when talking about GM whether the emphasis is on individuals' openness to adopting new cultural norms and experiences, or on their practical experience working across borders and proficiency in foreign languages. However, their findings reinforce the idea that CQ is an important factor in influencing both MTs' effectiveness as well as the strategic orientation of multicultural work settings. Moreover, CQ was shown to influence initial intentions as well as sustained engagement across various stages of international development. These insights extend the relevance of CQ beyond immediate interpersonal interactions to long-term organisational success in global settings.

Studies on CQ are not just limited to examining the overall CQ effect on team process and job performance. For example, Schlaegel et al. (2021) went further and examined the incremental and dimensional contributions of each CQ components (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural). Their study confirmed previous studies' findings on the positive effect of CQ on work-related outcomes and highlighted that the CQ dimensions influence each other in a mutually reinforcing way. In other words, the combination of two or more dimensions of CQ can further enhance the positive effect on various work-related outcomes. Furthermore, based on their findings motivational CQ identified as the most effective component that impacts team outcomes such as expatriation intention, cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction, whereas cognitive and metacognitive dimension of CQ show smaller but still meaningful contributions. However, behavioural CQ often functions as a suppressor variable, meaning it overlaps with other CQ dimensions without directly explaining these outcomes. Their findings demonstrate that it is not sufficient to treat CQ as a single, unified concept; rather, the unique and joint contributions of its dimensions provide a richer and more accurate understanding of how CQ drives work-related outcomes.

Regarding the development of CQ within MT members, most of the reviewed studies have suggested cross-cultural training as one of the most effective methods for developing CQ as well as other essential soft skills in MTs. However, Alon et al. (2016) argued the possibility of enhancing an individual's CQ level by proposing a business cultural intelligence quotient (BCIQ) framework. They found that organisations which are seeking to operate in a global context and want to effectively address the complexities of cultural boundaries among team members are required to acquire individuals with experience living abroad, a high level of education and multilingual proficiency. In other words, based on their findings, these three factors significantly affect an individual's CQ. Presbitero and Toledano (2018), while emphasising the role of cross-cultural training in improving CQ among global team members, highlighted the effective role of contact intensity among team members. Their findings support the idea that organisations that provide opportunities for their employees to have intense interactions with colleagues from other cultural backgrounds can achieve better individual-level task performance and higher levels of CQ.

### **3.2 Communication**

Communication is the second key soft skill consistently highlighted as a foundational skill for the success of culturally diverse teams, and it mainly refers to the combination of ability, knowledge, and motivation to exchange information and meaning across cultural boundaries effectively (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

Othman et al. (2022) in research on developing a cultural diversity management framework to enhance the performance of architecture design firms in Egypt found that 78% of participants identified poor communication and a weak *"spirit of collaboration"* as major barriers to managing a culturally diverse workforce, clearly demonstrating the role of effective communication in MTs' performance. Indeed, communication breakdowns within these workplaces lead to frequent misunderstandings and decreasing synergy in workforce groups. In contrast, open and inclusive communication style was found to *"harmonise workplace diversity"* as it improves mutual understanding and trust between team members. Therefore, they

recommended clear communication channels, basic language training and considering cultural sensitivity particularly when messaging in order to improve communication and mitigate miscommunication and its negative effects in these work environments.

Tenzer, Pudelko, and Harzing (2014) explored how language barriers impact trust among members of multinational teams (MNTs). Language barriers were identified as the main factor limiting effective communication and leading to multiple misunderstandings in MNTs. Based on their findings, communication difficulties rooted in language barriers were shown to adversely affect trust-building among team members which in turn undermines collaboration and overall team performance. The authors further argued that effective communication in MNTs requires language awareness, clarity, and sensitivity to differing linguistic backgrounds. Similar to Othman et al. (2022) this study also recommended creating an open, inclusive and positive emotional work environment where members do not fear losing face due to language proficiency issues, in order to overcome language-based anxiety.

Lai et al. (2017) further support the key role of effective communication in the successful integration of immigrant professionals into Canadian workplace culture. Based on their findings from interviews with both immigrant professionals and immigrant employment service providers, among all the challenges raised by multicultural workplaces, communication is one of the most significant difficulties that immigrants frequently face. Therefore, they emphasised the crucial role of effective communication not just as language proficiency but as the ability to navigate unspoken social cues, adapt tone and formality to context, manage small talk and understand implicit cultural norms around assertiveness and deference. These findings further support the role of effective communication in MTs as a complex, adaptive soft skill that is critical for inclusion, relationship building, and workplace integration.

However, the role of effective communication in culturally diverse teams is not just limited to the team level. As Newman et al. (2020) provided an empirical contribution to the understanding of the role of communication within global virtual teams specifically focusing on how team leaders' effective use of communication tools and techniques, influences team performance. In their study, effective communication is defined and examined as the number of times a leader communicates to team members, the degree to which a leader's communication is predictable, the level of responsiveness in leader communication or how timely the leader is in responding to questions and inquiries, the degree to which leaders make their communications clear and the mode or tool which leaders choose for communication and delivering their expectations. Their findings reveal a positive relationship between virtual team members' perceptions of their leaders' effective use of communication techniques and team members' subjective perceived performance of their teams, meaning that when leaders are able to communicate well, team members feel their team performs better. However, the authors argued although leaders' effective communication positively affects how team members feel about their performance, to observe this enhanced team performance objectively (e.g. balanced scorecard), leaders need to make sure that their messages are not only clear and timely but also matched and aligned with organisational goals.

### **3.3 Emotional Intelligence**

*Emotional intelligence* (EI) is defined in literature as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as to perceive and influence the emotions of others. Key dimensions of EI include self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills for building relationships (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). The included studies in this category show that higher EI at both team and managerial level enhances cross-cultural adjustment (CCA), trust, and team interaction.

Koveshnikov et al. (2014), provide quantitative evidence based on collected data from 269 French expatriates across 133 countries on the role of EI in expatriate success in international assignments. They examined to what extent various dimensions of EI grounded in Salovey and Mayer's EI model influence expatriates' CCA. Their study revealed that all dimensions of EI, appraising emotions, regulating emotional responses, and utilising emotions in problem-solving positively predicted general living, interactional and work-related CCA. This means that expatriates with higher levels of EI feel psychologically comfortable and able to better function in the new environment, cooperate with locals, apply their competencies and knowledge, learn new things, and cope with uncertainty.

Further supporting these findings, Konanahalli and Oyedele (2016) explored the role of EI among British expatriates in the construction sector across 29 countries in the Global South. Following Goleman's mixed-trait model, which includes both cognitive and behavioural dimensions of EI (e.g., self-awareness, self-

management, social awareness, and relationship management), their structural equation modelling (SEM) results showed that EI positively influenced an expatriate's adjustment to work and interaction in the new environment and to some extent diminish the cultural differences. However, they identified expatriates' social awareness and self-management as the most influential components of EI. In essence, while social awareness enables expatriates to better interact with others and eventually achieve organisationally desired outcomes, self-management helps them effectively navigate stress, and to be more emotionally in control.

Additionally, Schreier et al. (2019) as part of their study investigating management competencies that facilitate the performance of diverse teams in the Swiss context, identified "emotional stability and intelligence" as one of the most important qualities for managers leading diverse teams. In their interviews, managers who succeeded in diverse environments tended to be calm under pressure (self-regulation), aware of their own biases (self-awareness), and capable of understanding colleagues' feelings. Interestingly, findings from team perspective also confirmed the significant role of the manager's EI, as team members stated that they expected managers to demonstrate self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses fostering a team atmosphere of trust and psychological safety. Mammadov and Wald (2025), also found that senior managers with higher EI were better equipped to handle the emotional and psychological complexities of international interactions. In other words, EI in combination with a manager's global mindset, enhanced their ability to manage diverse teams and operate effectively in global markets. Although the study focuses on managerial-level competencies within SMEs, it provides strong evidence that emotionally intelligent leaders contribute to more adaptive, culturally responsive teams particularly when navigating high-stakes, uncertain, and fast-changing global contexts. Overall, these findings further support the essential role of EI not just in a team context but at the managerial level as well.

### **3.4 Adaptability**

Adaptability is not only defined as an individual's capacity to make appropriate responses to changed or changing situations but also, as their ability to modify or adjust one's behaviour in meeting various circumstances or different people (VandenBos, 2007). Pulakos et al. (2000) conceptualised adaptability in the context of the workplace as an eight-dimensional construct including: (1) dealing with uncertain or unpredictable situations; (2) managing emergencies or crises; (3) solving problems creatively; (4) managing work stress; (5) learning new tasks, technologies, and procedures (enthusiasm for new approaches); (6) demonstrating interpersonal adaptability (flexibility, open-mindedness); (7) demonstrating cultural adaptability (respect); (8) demonstrating physically oriented adaptability.

According to "Eight Dimensions of Adaptive Performance", adaptability includes a wide and multifaceted set of individual behaviours in changed or uncertain situations. It is often treated as a complementary skill supporting other key soft skills rather than being examined as a standalone variable. However, this treatment may be due to its conceptual breadth: as it spans behavioural, emotional, and cognitive adjustments across a variety of contexts. In this review we position adaptability as a foundational skill that enables effective application of other soft skills. While its function may often be to support or reinforce other soft skills, its direct role in shaping team behaviour and outcomes requires further independent attention.

In this regard, Lai et al. (2017) found that immigrant professionals in Canadian workplaces relied heavily on behavioural and cognitive flexibility to navigate implicit expectations and social cues. They highlighted that an adaptability-driven process is critical to successful workplace integration. Afsar et al. (2020) similarly demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of CQ were more likely to exhibit innovative behaviour and trust-building in culturally diverse teams, particularly when they were behaviourally adaptable. These two examples clearly show that while both studies' primary focus was on other soft skills, adaptability functioned as the behavioural mechanism through which other soft skills translated into action.

Guzmán-Rodríguez et al. (2023) also provided further empirical support demonstrating the critical role of adaptability in MTs. They assessed the impact of four individual-level characteristics: adaptability, cultural sensitivity, cohesion and cultural diversity on MTs' performance. Among these, adaptability was identified as the most valued trait by team leaders. Meaning that, leaders associate adaptability with better conflict resolution, faster adjustment to evolving team roles, and more efficient integration of diverse viewpoints. Their findings highlighted that adaptability enables individuals to effectively manage the dynamic and ambiguous conditions of culturally diverse work environments. Indeed, the ability to adjust behavioural expectations, respond to cultural differences respectfully, and flexibly collaborate across varying interpersonal styles was found to directly support performance. Their study showed that adaptability plays both supportive and enabling role in facilitating effective behaviour across changing intercultural contexts, as it helps

individuals to understand shifting norms, adjust communication approaches, and align with divergent team expectations.

Taken together, these findings indicate that adaptability, while often intertwined with other soft skills, operates with distinct behavioural and psychological mechanisms that justify its treatment as a standalone and unique skill. In MTs where shifting cultural expectations, various communication styles and unfamiliar power dynamics are common, adaptability becomes an essential skill that enables team members not only to cope but also to thrive in fluid, diverse environments.

#### 4. Proposed Framework

Although culturally diverse work environments often benefit from greater creativity, innovation and better decision-making, they frequently face challenges such as lack of trust, limited knowledge sharing, weak spirit of collaboration, reduced psychological safety (e.g. uncertainty, anxiety), and conflicts. (Stahl & Maznevski, 2010; Bouncken *et al.*, 2016; Gross-Golacka and Martyniuk, 2024) However, based on the synthesis of empirical evidence and theoretical insights from the included studies, this paper highlights the importance and influence of the four identified core soft skills and their interconnected roles in enhancing MTs' effectiveness through effectively navigating challenges. The framework conceptualises these soft skills as foundational enablers of key team processes such as trust-building, inclusion, knowledge sharing, and constructive conflict management. As a result, these processes contribute to positive team-level outcomes, including cohesion, performance, and retention.

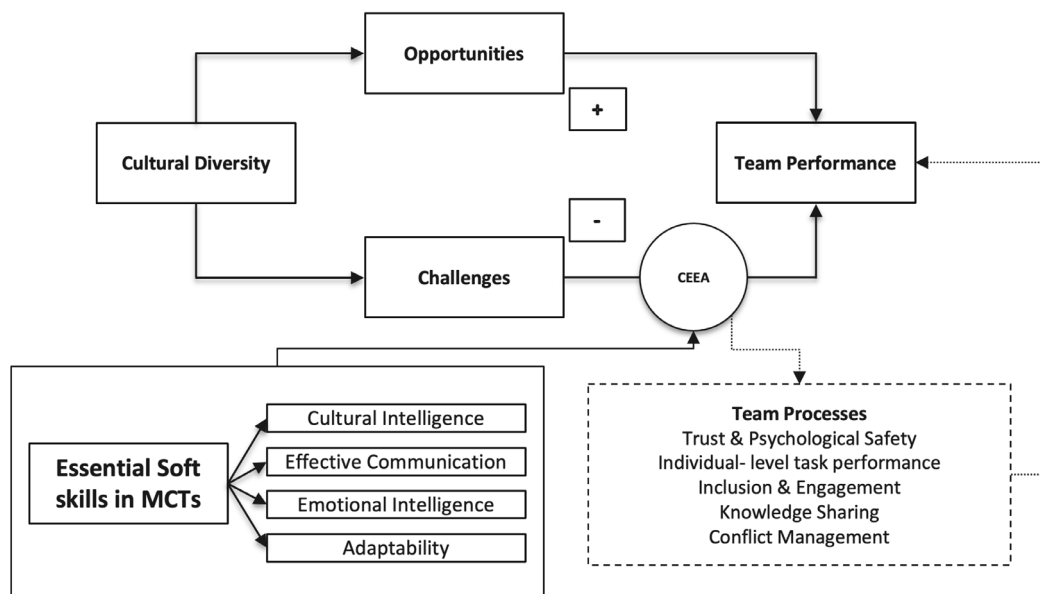


Figure 2: Theoretical Model of Soft Skills in Culturally Diverse Team Performance. [Source: Authors, 2025]

#### 5. Conclusion

Through this study, we identified the significant role of communication, cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, and adaptability in bridging the cultural gap, shaping team dynamics, and enhancing team performance in multicultural work environments. This study has shown that these soft skills, interact in complex ways that reinforce one another in enabling teams to manage the challenges that commonly arise in such workplaces ranging from language barriers and cultural misunderstandings to psychological safety and collaborative trust. Indeed, these soft skills as shown in a synergistic framework, determine whether cultural diversity becomes a driver of creativity and innovation or a source of conflicts and challenges. To maximise the benefits of MTs while effectively managing their inherent tensions, multinational and culturally diverse organisations must treat the development of these soft skills not as optional enhancements but as strategic imperatives.

## 6. Practical Implication

This review offers important implications for both leaders, and human resource professionals in effectively managing culturally diverse teams and maximising the opportunities of having a MT. Our findings through this review further support the importance of developing soft skills as a timely and strategic response to the challenges and opportunities of multicultural teamwork.

Organisations with culturally diverse teams as well as organisations which operate internationally should integrate soft skills specifically the four identified in this study into core human resource practices, including recruitment, selection, and performance evaluation. While studies in the field of cross-cultural management often treat intercultural competencies as post-entry trainable outcomes, this review supports a more integrated perspective. As many of the competencies underpinning intercultural effectiveness such as behavioural adaptability, empathy, emotional regulation, and cultural sensitivity can be assessed and identified at the pre-employment stage. Thus, we suggest that the recruitment process should include measures capturing soft skills through standard tests such as Mayer–Salovey EI, CQ Scale (CQS), to assess (potential) employees' soft skill levels. Additionally, organisations operating in a global context should actively seek out talents with a high Business Cultural Intelligence Quotient (BCIQ), which can be signalled through international experience, multilingual proficiency, and advanced education (Alon et al., 2016). Acquiring such individuals and providing opportunities to further enhance these capabilities through targeted development initiatives can improve both individual and organisational performance.

Therefore, to effectively address challenges within MTs, organisations are required to move toward embedding soft skills into both recruitment and development processes while also committing to systematic evaluation of these interventions and future empirical studies are needed to validate the effectiveness of such practices across industries, particularly in relation to MTs' outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Nasrullah Khilji and Prof. Konstantin Nikolic for their invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout the development of this research.

**Ethics Declaration:** This study is based on secondary data from published literature and all relevant ethical considerations were observed.

**AI Declaration:** AI tools were used in a limited capacity just to assist with language clarity and check grammar. We confirm that no AI tools were used to generate content, conduct analysis, or interpret findings.

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