

## **INNOVATIVE TEAMS THROUGH THE LENSES OF TEAM LEADERS: CHARACTERISTICS, CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

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**ABSTRACT.** Teamwork as well as the interest in innovation in business are two of the few constant features of contemporary companies, which manifest themselves within a general context characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. In a company, the benefits of teamwork are widely acknowledged, whereas innovation in business is a strategic direction. This work is based on empirical research, and its main purpose is to identify the characteristics of the innovative teams, the challenges that they have to face, and their achievements, respectively. The empirical research undertaken is a qualitative one and it proposes a case study, the primary data being collected through interviews conducted with a number of four team leaders of innovative teams. The respondents work for companies in the fields of production of electric/electronic products, information technology and computer services, GPS, navigation technology, respectively; all these are fields in which innovation is an important component of successful companies. According to the team leaders who were interviewed, the characteristics of the innovative teams can be assessed in terms of: (i) results (“deliverable”) which contribute to the general effort of the company to be competitive on the innovation market; (ii) performance (reaching efficiently all objectives), (iii) the way of working of the team (the presence of psychological safety, proper communication) and (iv) composition (the qualities of the team members, such as autonomy, diversity and orientation towards cooperation). The main

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challenge of the innovative teams is given by the high level of stress arising as a consequence of the conditions (such as deadlines and budget restrictions) under which the main objective has to be reached, namely, to obtain products and/or services, new or improved processes, respectively. To all of these, there can be added ones that are specific to teamwork, generally, such as existing conflicts, reduced motivation, and individualism at executive level. The main achievements of the innovative teams, according to the interviewed leaders, are the obtaining of new technologies, product optimisation, complying with deadlines, a high level of quality, and the employees' development, which is an essential aspect which contributes to their motivation and implicitly to their training to become future leaders.

**Keywords:** Business Innovation, Teamwork, Innovative teams, team composition.

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## **Introduction and Literature Review**

Innovation is the most suitable response of contemporary companies which perform in an extremely dynamic environment. The present environment, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, requires a proactive approach to change (Schoemaker<sup>1</sup>, Heaton, & Teece, 2018). So as not to disappear from the market, companies have to adopt new strategies and solutions which will allow them to adapt to the market conditions, which are in continuous modification (McDowell, Mesaros, Sorkin, & Rooney, 2019). Human resources play an important role, the innovative potential of a company is given by its employees'

knowledge and abilities. In fact, “the people, not the products, are an innovative element” (Patterson, Kerrin, & Gatto-Roissard, 2009), the real innovation and the competitive advantage ensured by them rely much more on people than on processes (Zwilling, 2013).

Teams are often associated with innovation in companies, regardless of the fact that it is about organizational innovation (Racolța-Paina, 2009), (Ćwiklick, 2014), (Fay, Shipton, West, & Patterson, 2015); the development of innovative ideas (Deichmann & Jensen, 2017), or of innovation in business (Johnsson, 2017). The differentiation of an innovative team from the rest of the team is accomplished taking the main objective set, namely “to pioneer something new at a company – a product, a process, a pivot, etc.” (Grubbs, 2019) respectively, to lead “innovation work within an organization” (Johnsson, 2017). The innovative teams’ goal is to improve their services towards the clients and related operations (Desai, 2017). The leaders are responsible for forming and leading the teams with the aim to reach the objectives set by them (Llopis, 2014). It is exactly from here that the leaders’ role comes out, and that is why we value their opinion when we study teamwork.

In this context, our interest is to identify the aspects regarding the innovative teams, according to their team leaders. The present work is based on empirical qualitative research. For the case study proposed by the authors, the research method employed is the semi-structured interview. The research question of this research is: “What are innovative teams like, according to their leaders?” We chose to identify and to analyse the perception of the team leaders regarding the team led by him/her considering that their perspective brings valuable elements regarding innovative teams. The main research goals are: (i) identifying the features of innovative teams, according to their leaders, and (ii) identifying the main challenges as well as the achievements of the innovative teams, from their leaders’ perspective. To answer the research questions mentioned above, we interviewed a number of four team leaders of four companies on the market of Romania.

The main results of this research consider a series of aspects specific to innovative teams, from their leaders’ perspective. The novelty degree of our research is given by the case study proposed, the results of the research referring to a specific situation in which we can produce a series of aspects that can be used in the future, by all those who are interested in the functioning of the innovative teams.

The scientific literature regarding innovative teams is extremely generous, the subjects approached being diverse, such as the typology of innovative teams (Andrés, Broncano, & Monsalve, 2015); characteristics of the innovative teams (Schwarz, 2015), (Zwilling, 2013), (Grubbs, 2019), (Desai, 2017), (Bouquet, 2018), (Banholzer, Metzeler, & Roth, 2019); building up innovative teams (Satell, 2018); the relationship between innovation and team performance (Berber, Slavic, & Marko, 2020); the link between innovation and company - level sustainable performance (Cizmas, Feder, & Maticiuc, 2020); innovation enablers for innovation teams (Johnsson, 2017). The importance of the innovative teams is major, considering that they “help businesses avoid travelling down the linear path of doom.” (Desai, 2017) The functioning of innovative teams is influenced by “the organizational context, including management, the team itself, and the individuals within the team” (Johnsson, 2017).

Regarding the characteristics of the innovative teams, in this work we choose to refer to the characteristics of the team members in question as well as aspects regarding the way of working of the team and its integration in the company in question.

Therefore, according to Grubbs (2019), the characteristics of the suitable employees for an innovative team are “technical skills and the ability to think creatively and critically, diversity of thought and background, and the ability to really focus on the innovation project.” In another approach, Zwilling (2013) defines the members of innovative teams as “thinkers and problem solvers, passionate and inquisitive, challenge the status quo, connect the dots, see the big picture, collaborative and action related.” The characteristics of the members of the innovative teams are summed up by Banholzer, Metzeler & Roth (2019) in four large categories, namely, vision, collaboration, learning, and execution. Thus, according to these authors, employees with vision have the ability to identify new opportunities and to inspire others to pursue them too. Once these opportunities are identified, it is important to transpose them into a differentiated value. The employees with features belonging to the second-wide category, promote teamwork and change management which lead to cohesion. These features stimulate a work environment which tolerates failure as a necessary aspect in the innovation process. The employees manifesting features of the third wide category defined by Banholzer, Metzeler

& Roth (2019) play an important role in the innovative teams as it is always important for each member to try to find new ideas and to make them part of their work as quickly as possible. The employees belonging to the last group mentioned by the above quoted authors manifest the capacity to make decisions fast under uncertainty conditions, managing to maintain a realistic pace of progress. These members of the team show resilience and perseverance when faced with delays and they adapt their plans to new situations rapidly.

As for the essential conditions that need to be met at an innovative team level, the approaches are extremely diverse. Therefore, Grubbs (2019) mentions the right to fail (that is, the acceptance of failure as part of expectations, and even compensation and rewards); a generous budget (the mere generation of ideas without their implementation is not enough, on the other hand a large budget allocated may lead to just a simple learning experience when failure occurs in innovation), a new location (a new location may bring new perspectives, as people who work in new environments often think differently, which is an important aspect for innovation), a mixed team in terms of work/job (inside or outside of the company), and so on. In another approach, Zwilling (2013) mentions the integration of members with innovative potential in the team, as well as the development of a certain type of culture at team level, which implies a safe environment for sharing and implementing ideas. Desai (2017) proposes other requirements that need to be met at the innovative team level, namely, realistic expectations regarding the role and the results of the innovative team in question (which often needs the support of the whole company), integration in the company (the collaboration between the innovative team and the rest of the company is of utmost importance), the credibility of the innovative team (which is built to overcome fear and scepticism that might occur within the company), a well defined process (such as the Lean Startup method), a well-rounded team (that is a diverse team in terms of professional abilities of its members). Solmaz-Kaise (2019) regards as essential requirements of the innovative the following aspects: a set of values as part of the team, namely, courage, focus, commitment, respect, and openness. According to the quoted source, adopting these values (in fact, taken from agile SCRUM methodology) leads to the innovative teams' success. Schwarz (2015) proposes the following aspects as essential requirements of innovative teams: "a compelling vision, goal interdependence, support for innovation, task orientation, a cohesive team, strong internal

and external communication”. Bouquet (2018) mentions the reconciliation of certain aspects which might seem conflictual at first glance when he speaks about innovative teams. According to this author, it is about: diversity of perspectives and the availability to work with each other; empathy and objectivity; psychological confidence and sound friction. Bouquet (2018) remarks that the diversity of the team contributes to the diversity of ideas and as well as of the solutions to the problems they encounter. In a harmonious environment, ideas are debated and analysed among the members of the team who can choose together the best solution. These aspects are important, and they develop when psychological safety exists within the team, which “involves but goes beyond interpersonal trust; it describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.” (Edmondson, 1999) In these teams, the members “feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.” (Rozovsky, 2015)

Considering those mentioned above, we can remark that the essential requirements that need to be met at the innovative team level can be divided into two main categories, namely: (i) those that refer to the place and the image of the team in question within the company that they belong to, see Desai (2017) and (ii) those which refer to internal aspects of these innovative teams; see Grubbs (2019), Zwilling (2013), Solmaz-Kaise (2019), Schwarz (2015), Bouquet (2018).

Innovative companies, within which the innovative teams are the ones that contribute to reaching the defined objectives, can be found in different fields of business, such as industrial manufacturing industry (Racolța-Paina & Mone, 2009), (PWC, 2013); hospitality industry (Negrusa & Starcu, 2017); rural tourism sector (Toader & Gica, 2014), (Pop, Coroș, & Balint, 2017); financial services industry (Pop A. M., 2020), (Duma & Gligor, 2018) and so on. Regarding the size of the companies within which innovation is largely adopted, the big companies can be ranked as innovative just like the small ones, according to a study published in 2020 by the consultancy company BCG (Ringel, Baeza, Panandiker, & Harnoss, 2020). The stimulation of innovation leads to an increased competitiveness of the companies, an important aspect when they define their objectives on the international market. (Burcă-Voicu & Oprescu, 2020).

## **Material and Method**

As we mentioned in the Introduction, the present work is based on empirical, qualitative research. The aim of the research undertaken is to identify different aspects regarding the innovative teams, as mentioned by their team leaders. The primary data for the proposed case study were collected by means of the method of the semi-structured interview. The research question of this research is: "What are innovative teams like, according to their leaders?" The main research goals are: (i) identifying the characteristics of the innovative team steams according to their leaders, and (ii) identifying the main challenges as well as the achievements of the innovative teams from their leaders' perspective. To answer these research questions, we interviewed a number of four team leaders of four companies on the market of Romania. Our approach can be framed within the well-established coordinates of scientific research, as follows "Empirical research involves collecting data or empirical observations and analysing the data to answer a specific research question; it can be quantitative or qualitative." (Petchko, 2018)

The undertaken primary research followed several stages, as it follows. The first stage consisted in developing the data collection tool, that is, the Interview Guide. Thus, that contained a number of six questions, all of them open questions, the aspects concerned being those that can be framed within the research objectives of the present research. It is about: the identification of the features of the innovative teams, emphasizing the challenges within the innovative teams, as well as the identification of the main achievements of these. When we developed the Interview Guide, we took into account a series of restrictions, namely, the limited time granted, generally by the respondents for such interviews, as well as the rather limited availability of the respondents face-to-face interviews (both because of their busy programmes and of the existent situations due to the Covid-19 pandemic during the time when the primary data were collected, in the June-July 2020 time-span).

The next stage consisted in identifying the suitable people to be interviewed. To be eligible, the subjects needed to have occupied a leadership position for at least one year (team leader or project team manager), their company being active in a field in which innovation is widely adopted. We chose these coordinates for the profile of the people who were to be interviewed with the belief that the perspective of a team

leader regarding their team is a relevant one, after an experience of at least one year as a team leader. In the identification of the suitable people to fit into this profile, we used the snowball sampling method. Our argument is that this method “is also a commonly used method for ... and in qualitative studies” (Johnson, 2014). Thus, the first team leader who fit into the profile mentioned above, from whom we received a positive answer to our request to give us an interview, recommended other team leaders to us. Actually, we received a recommendation which led to an increased acceptance rate of interviews conducted to the people we asked for it. Finally, we interviewed four team leaders, all of whom fit into the established profile (see Table 1).

**Table 1. The profile of the four interviewed team leaders**

<b>Initials of the interviewed</b>	<b>Occupied position</b>	<b>Seniority in work</b>	<b>The field of activity of the company</b>
M.P	Research & Development Team Leader	2 years	Electric/Electronic Products Production
Ș.A.	Team Lead	5 years	GPS Navigation Technologies Producer
V.B.	Team Lead	1 year and 3 months	Electrical/Electronic Products Production
A.I.	IT Project Manager	3 years	Information Technology and IT services

Source: authors' work

The interviews were taken online in the period June-July 2020. As it can be noticed (Table 1), the four interviewed persons occupied team leader positions, with a seniority in work between 1 year and 3 months and 5 years, respectively. All of them worked in companies located in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, performing in fields in which innovation is often an important competitive advantage.

The final part of the research consisted in the analysis of the data collected through the interviews to reach the two objectives of the present study and therefore to answer the research question defined. To accomplish that, we used the content analysis, identifying the key concepts which could be found in the answers that we received during the interviews,



given the aspects involved in the defined research objectives. The primary data analysis and interpretation are the subject of the next part of the present work.

## Results and Discussions

Next, we present and analyse the data collected through the four interviews, the research objectives being: (i) identifying the characteristics of the innovative teams, according to their leaders, according to their leaders, and (ii) identifying the main challenges as well as the achievements of the innovative teams, from their leaders' perspective.

In what the characteristics of the innovative teams are concerned, the most important aspects of the answers received from the four interviewed team leaders are presented below (see Table 2).

**Table 2. The synthesis of the information collected through the conducted interviews regarding the characteristics of the innovative teams**

Interviewed	Data collected
	The characteristics of innovative teams
M.P	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are performant in terms of results;</li> <li>• They obtain “deliverables” which differentiate themselves from other similar products;</li> <li>• They adopted the Agile procedure, within which the premises and requirements permanently change;</li> <li>• The innovative team members:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- organize and prioritize their work themselves;</li> <li>- know their role and capacity to work very well;</li> <li>- are united and believe that the result as a mutual effort;</li> <li>- trust their colleagues, each member of the team looks for and is open to feedback;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Ş.A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They distinguish the company from the competing firms;</li> <li>• They are one of so-called “crown diamonds” of a company;</li> <li>• They attract talented people willing to become performant;</li> <li>• They can be characterized by diversity in terms of gender, age, personality, and training;</li> <li>• The members of the innovative team are:</li> </ul>

Interviewed	Data collected
	<b>The characteristics of innovative teams</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- willing to become performant (not as individuals, but mainly as a group);</li> <li>- very good in their field of specialization;</li> <li>- passionate, manifesting respect, confident, devoted;</li> <li>- with good knowledge about the competition and related industries;</li> <li>- visionaries;</li> </ul>
V.B.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any idea coming from each member of the team is supported;</li> <li>• Creativity is encouraged;</li> <li>• There is psychological safety;</li> <li>• There is communication among the members of the team, they exchange knowledge and ideas;</li> <li>• There is support for innovation and failure;</li> <li>• The members of the innovative team find solutions to the existing problems together;</li> </ul>
A.I.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They produce solutions to the problems (at implementation level as well as given by the constraints of resources) they face;</li> <li>• There is clear communication both within the team as well as with those outside it;</li> <li>• There is a good cooperation among the team members;</li> <li>• The members of the team are autonomous in making decisions without the risk of being marginalized;</li> </ul>

Source: authors' work

According to the interviewed team leaders (see Table 2), the characteristics of the innovative companies are identified in four main categories, namely, (i) by results (“deliverable”) which contribute to the general effort of the company to be competitive on the market by innovation; (ii) performance (reaching the defined objectives in an efficient manner), (iii) the way of working of the team (the existence of psychological safety, very effective communication) and (iv) team composition (the qualities of the team members, such as autonomy, diversity and orientation towards collaboration).

Therefore, according to M.P., an innovative team is an efficient team, which functions very well regardless of the circumstances, being focused only on its results, always pursuing its objectives and contributing to the differentiation of the company they belong to on the competitive market. The same idea regarding the great importance of the innovative teams for the competitiveness of the company in question can also be found at Ş.A. The latter asserted that an innovative team is the main element in a company, the employees being one of the most important resources for its efficient functioning. For Ş.A., the innovative teams are capable of making their companies unique on the market as they have objectives oriented towards new processes of innovation which lead to the best results no matter if we talk about a product or a service. Ş.A. believed that the innovative teams are one of the “crown diamonds” of a company.

In what the “performance” characteristic of the innovative teams is concerned, A.I. refers to their capacity of producing solutions to the problems they have to face, no matter if they are at the implementation level or they are given by the constraints of the allocated resources (time, budget, etc.). M.P. talked about the Agile way of working of his team, in which premises and requirements permanently change.

As for the way of working of the teams, Ş.A. underlined that the innovative teams need an environment where each member of the team can express their points of view, wishes, and ideas. Furthermore, the team leader remarked that this environment, characterized by psychological security, attracts passionate and interested people, an aspect which is extremely relevant for the companies interested in talents on the market. The importance of the psychological safety within the innovative team was also mentioned by V.B. According to him, the psychological safety provides confidence especially to those who are at the beginning and who are not very experienced at work. This aspect is of utmost importance for their encouragement. Thus, we can notice that the psychological safety within the team, sharing a direct and positive impact upon the performance of the team (Edmondson, 1999), could also be found in the answers received from the interviewed team leaders.

Another important aspect related to how innovative teams work is a good communication, which contributes to the exchange of ideas among the members, according to V.B. The latter mentioned that in his team those results were appreciated, and that failure was met with understanding. Thus, V.B. mentioned the importance of supporting ideas within the team,

the interest of the team members to find solutions, ensuring a high level of collaboration (which creates a pleasant atmosphere and makes the team members work with delight, aspects which are an important component for the efficiency of the team). The good level of collaboration alongside with the unity of the innovative team members was also mentioned by M.P. This team leader referred to the high level of trust existing in his team, an important aspect which explains the openness that his colleagues manifest in expressing their ideas. Even if M.P. did not use the well-established term, we can remark that there is psychological safety within his team, an essential factor for its performance (Lagace, 2018).

According to the answers received from the four interviewed team leaders (see Table 2), the structure of the innovative teams is one of their important characteristics. Thus, according to M.P., innovative teams have autonomous members, independent at organizational and decision taking levels. These members work together well as a consequence of the fact that they know their roles well and that they know what tasks they can take. The autonomy of the innovative team members, this time at decisional level, was mentioned by A.I. The diversity of the team members is an important characteristic of the innovative team, according to Ș.A. This team leader mentioned that a diverse team stimulates creativity as each member approaches the path to the innovative processes in a different way, enabling the team members to learn new things from each other. According to Ș.A., the innovative team members are willing to assert themselves, they are passionate and eager to expose their ideas and to discuss them with their team members. Furthermore, according to Ș.A., they possess deep knowledge in their speciality field, the connection between passion and performance being a strong one.

Another considered aspect is the challenges that the innovative teams face. A synthesis of the answers received from the four team leaders is presented further on (see Table 3).

According to the data collected through interviews (see Table 3), three of the four interviewed team leaders chose stress as a challenge for their team as a consequence of the related constraints (time and budget), to which the great dynamics of the emergence of innovation on the market was added, the large amount of new information to be assimilated as well as the pressure of identifying the optimal solution from the big number

of ideas and opinions circulated. We can remark that the main challenge of the innovative teams is tied to the conditions (deadlines and budget pressure, etc.) in which the main objective pursued by these teams needs to be met, that is of conceiving products and/or new services as well as new processes (Grubbs, 2019). A fourth team leader mentioned the challenges of his team which are specific to teamwork, namely, the existence of internal conflicts, the low level of motivation, and a certain degree of individualism which has a negative impact upon the team's results.

**Table 3. The synthesis of the information collected through the conducted interviews regarding the challenges of the innovative teams**

Interviewed	Data collected
	The challenges faced by the innovative teams
M.P	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The insufficient time allocated to projects (the pressure upon the company to create a deliverable product);</li> <li>• The diversity within the team, in term of work experience;</li> </ul>
Ş.A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The speed at which everything happens in the business world and as a consequence the large amount of information that has to be assimilated;</li> <li>• The purpose of implementing, testing, and delivering innovative products in due time (being first on the market);</li> <li>• Complying within a limited budget;</li> <li>• Stress management;</li> <li>• Finding the balance between professional and personal life;</li> </ul>
V.B.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress management;</li> <li>• Finding the optimal solution of thousands of ideas and opinions;</li> </ul>
A.I.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The existence of internal conflicts;</li> <li>• A low level of motivation;</li> <li>• Execution at individual level;</li> </ul>

Source: authors' work

M.P. mentioned that, as a rule, the new ideas coming from each of the members of the team are encouraged in an innovative team, but to listen and to test each idea takes time. The difficulty of complying with deadlines for his team was also numbered as one of his challenges by Ş.A. Therefore, according to him, innovation means keeping oneself up-to-date with all the new information, which turns to be an extremely difficult task especially when the team needs to comply with deadlines whenever finalizing a project is at stake. V.B. also referred to the fact that time was an impediment for his team; as each member comes up with an idea, it

takes time to test and to implement it. Diversity, a beneficial aspect for the innovative team (Bouquet, 2018), was called a challenge in his team by M.P., as the lack of experience of some members had a negative impact upon the results obtained by them.

A.I. named conflicts as a challenge for his team, as they turned out to be a great impediment for the efficiency of his team (if it is hard to manage and solutions for diminishing it are hard to be found). As a consequence of the existence of conflicts, relationships can get damaged, trust is lost, and communication becomes difficult to be achieved. A.I. underlined that if these conflicts became recurrent, the team members' lack of motivation would implicitly make its way.

According to the four interviewed team leaders, the achievements of the teams are given by the fulfilment of the assumed objectives, to which other aspects can be added (see Table 4).

**Table 4. The synthesis of the information collected through the conducted interviews regarding the achievements of the innovative teams**

Interviewed	Data collected
	The achievements of the innovative teams
M.P.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceiving testing systems;</li> <li>• Implementing some software systems with own resources;</li> </ul>
Ș.A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivering in time and meeting high quality standards everything agreed upon;</li> <li>• The employees' development;</li> </ul>
V.B.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The optimization of the product, providing some advanced solutions on the market;</li> <li>• The continuous improvement of the standard products;</li> <li>• Unique presence on the market;</li> </ul>
A.I.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing a test solution which was adopted by the rest of the company.</li> </ul>

Source: authors' work

According to the data collected (see Table 4), three of the four interviewed team leaders mentioned the new or improved product/service as an accomplishment of the team they lead. Thus, M.P. mentioned "the complex test systems which, if externalized, could cost hundreds of thousands of Euros" when he referred to the achievements of the team led by

him. Ş.A. referred to a set of requirements which were met by his team when they deliver a product/service, namely, complying with deadlines and with the requirements regarding quality, at the same time. For V.B., the achievements of his team are associated both with the continuous improvement of the standard products and also the radical innovation, which ensures them a unique presence on the market.

Another perspective of the achievements of the teams was brought about by Ş.A., who added that “by what and how we do, we manage to inspire the others as well.” We value this team leader’s perspective, as his answer tells us that he understands the importance of the members of his team very well. Thus, it is exactly the team members’ development that turns into a benefit of an innovative team.

## **Conclusions**

Our interest in the topic of innovative teams is due to their importance, which is acknowledged worldwide within the companies that wish to be competitive on the nowadays market.

This paper is based on empirical, qualitative research. For the case study, we used the semi-structured interview method. The research question of this research is: “What are innovative teams like, according to their leaders?” Our option was to get to know and analyse the team leaders’ perspective regarding the team led by him/her, motivated by the consideration that their perspective brings valuable elements regarding the innovative teams. As this is a wide and complex topic, the aspects targeted by us in this study are as follows: the characteristics of the innovative teams as well as the challenges they need to face and their main achievements. Thus, the main data used to undertake this study were collected through interviews. As a consequence, we interviewed four team leaders of four companies in Cluj-Napoca (see Table 1), all of them acting in fields of activity in which innovation is a basic competence that ensures their competitiveness on the market.

As the first research objective is concerned, namely, (i) Identifying the characteristics of the innovative teams, the data collected indicate the following: the interviewed team leaders referred to different aspects (see Table 2), namely: (i) results (“deliverable”) which contribute to the general effort of the company to be competitive on the market by innovation;

(ii) performance (reaching the defined objectives in an efficient manner), (iii) the way of working of the team (the existence of psychological safety, very effective communication) and (iv) team composition (the qualities of the team members, such as autonomy, diversity and orientation towards collaboration). We can remark that the first two aspects (results and performance) chosen as characteristics of the innovative teams by the interviewed team leaders are measurable and quantifiable. On the other hand, the other two aspects (the way of working and the composition of the team) involve multiple and complex elements, with many facets, which share different and often interdependent nuances. For example, if the team members are independent, they can take decisions on their own, aspect which motivates them; the level of psychological safety is a high one, therefore they give and receive feedback, acknowledging their mistakes. Furthermore, the employees who are passionate about their work are devoted, they manifest a high level of commitment, and they also communicate efficiently.

Regarding the second research objective, that is, identifying the main challenges as well as the main achievements of the innovative teams, from their leaders' perspective, our conclusions are as follows. As part of the challenges of the innovative teams (see Table 3), we identified a specific one, namely, the high level of stress due to the conditions (meeting deadlines and complying with budget limitations) under which the team's main objective needs to be reached, that is to conceive new products and/or services as well as new processes. According to the answers received, these conditions are hard to meet exactly because of the characteristics of the innovative teams. For instance, the diversity of the team members has several facets. Thus, it consists of diversity in thinking and perspective, which means a multitude of ideas and approaches, which take a lot of time to be discussed and analysed. Or, the team is diverse from the perspective of the team members' experience level, aspect which can impact the results of the team in question in a negative way. Another characteristic of the innovative teams is the team members' passion for what they do, their professionalism which leads to a high level of exigence regarding information an aspect which requires time due to the large amount of new information which appears on the market every single day in the fields of activity in which the teams, whose leaders were interviewed, perform. Likewise, the tight deadlines are hard to meet, considering those mentioned above.



Other challenges of innovative teams are generally specific to teamwork, like the presence of conflicts, a low motivation level as well as individualism at operational level.

The main achievements of the innovative teams, according to the interviewed team leaders, are the conception of new technologies, the optimization of their products, complying with the existent deadlines, and with high quality standards. To all these, the employees' development can be added, an aspect of utmost importance which contributes to their motivation and loyalty, as well as to their development into future leaders.

Taking the above-mentioned aspects into account, one may conclude that the present work proposes a set of aspects specific to the innovative teams, aspects identified by their team leaders. The results of the present research can turn into a solid ground for further both qualitative and quantitative empirical research. In the future, a potential research direction can be given by the identification and the analysis of the innovative team members regarding their features as well as the main challenges and also their achievements. Thus, we could compare the team leaders' perspective with the employees' one so as to identify both their common and their divergent point of views. We believe that such research can contribute significantly to generate knowledge about the way innovative teams function. These results can be extremely useful for those interested to understand how innovative teams are led, as well as how their results could be improved. Innovation is one of the few constants of the present-day successful companies, together with teamwork. Therefore, the subject of the present work is an extremely up-to-date topic, with great importance for those involved in the leadership of contemporary companies and with a significant importance for future empirical research.

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