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## TURNING DIVERSITY INTO PERFORMANCE: HOW COHESION DRIVES KAZAKHSTANI PROJECT TEAMS

### Abstract

The present paper investigates the potential returns from diversity within project teams in Kazakhstan, a country hardly considered in the body of mainstream organizational studies, as well as through which mechanism this return may be achieved. Using a survey of 103 managers across several industries, we conducted a set of nine hypothesis tests concerning the relationship between cultural diversity and communication, trust, conflict, cohesion, and performance within teams. There exists a significant positive correlation between diversity and performance ( $r = .463$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast to typical relationships found in Western literature, diversity in our sample positively correlates with both trust ( $r = .448$ ) and cohesion ( $r = .478$ ), having no impact whatsoever on conflict levels. All five predictors together account for 63.8% of performance variance, with cohesion being the only significant predictor ( $\beta = .673$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the direct relationship between diversity and performance loses its significance ( $\beta = -.057$ ,  $p > .05$ ), suggesting full mediation. We suggest that the collectivist nature of Kazakhstan's society and the existence of officially guaranteed ethnic peace and harmony mitigate significantly the adverse effects of the "double-edged sword," and thus cohesion emerges as the main mediator for translating diversity into performance improvement. Of nine hypotheses, five turn out to be supported.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, team performance, team cohesion, project management, Kazakhstan, collectivist culture, mediation.

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### Introduction

The issue of managing culturally diverse teams has been a key element of modern project management practices in virtually any knowledge-based industry. The influx of foreign investments into the oil and gas industry, globalization processes in the international banking and IT companies, as well as national-level digitalization strategies have resulted in the emergence of work teams consisting of employees with different cultural, linguistic, and professional backgrounds. However, research on the influence of such diversity on the efficiency of teamwork in Kazakhstan appears to be rather scant. In fact, many empirical insights on diversity-performance relationships originate from North American or Western European contexts [1, 2], and their applicability to the Kazakh situation is not clear at all.

The dominant approach in international research sees cultural diversity as a "double-edged sword," delivering positive results by enhancing understanding and perspectives and creating negative effects through social classification, lack of trust, and increased conflict [1]. Therefore, the overall effect on productivity will be roughly neutral, since the advantages and disadvantages tend

to cancel each other out. It is argued by some researchers that there is no need for these two effects to counteract each other; various moderators including national culture, organizational culture, and group experience may affect the balance between the positive and negative effects [3, 4]. Nevertheless, this idea has remained empirically underexplored until recently.

In terms of addressing the identified research gap, the present study makes a contribution from three different perspectives. Firstly, in theoretical terms, our study demonstrates that the predictions of social categorization theory are context-dependent, do not hold under conditions of collectivism and harmony-based institutions, and consequently questions the universalism of the double-edged sword paradigm. Secondly, from an empirical perspective, our study offers one of the few systematic data analyses pertaining to the performance-diversity relationship within the Central Asian setting, filling a gap in a field where most empirical findings have been generated from Western settings. Thirdly, our study suggests that team cohesion rather than conflict resolution mediates diversity benefits in Kazakhstani teams.

## Materials and methods

### Theoretical frameworks

There have been two major traditions of theorizing about the phenomenon of diversity that dominate empirical research on diverse teams. First, the information processing tradition asserts that diverse teams outperform homogeneous groups because they share more extensive knowledge bases and apply a wider range of problem solving strategies. [5] This idea seems to be highly consistent with the empirical evidence for the benefits of diversity in situations where creative problem solving skills are needed. Second, according to the social identity and self-categorization theories, people perceive those who seem different from them culturally as members of the out-group, which negatively affects communication, lowers trust, and contributes to conflicts. [6] Finally, the categorization-elaboration model combines the above ideas into one framework, which suggests that diversity promotes information elaboration and social categorization, the balance between which depends on the presence of moderating variables, including team context, task characteristics, and leadership practices. [3]

### Team processes as pathways

Processes that help explain how team composition is turned into team outcomes include team communication, trust, conflict, and cohesion [7, 8]. Effective communication allows for the exchange of different knowledge instead of the stockpiling of knowledge. Trust helps in taking the risks required for intercultural cooperation. Conflict related to tasks can be beneficial, while conflict related to relationships always negatively impacts task performance [9]. Cohesion, or attraction and identification of team members with the group, is positively correlated with team performance [10].

In many studies carried out among Western societies, higher levels of diversity are linked with lower levels of trust, weaker cohesion, and higher conflict [11]. Nevertheless, various researchers have warned that these relationships do not hold true universally but are dependent on specific national cultural and institutional circumstances [4]. Modern diversity studies emphasize the importance of looking into issues beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) societies [12].

### Kazakhstan as context

The Kazakhstani society offers an entirely different setting for the discussion on diversity management, because it is made up of over 130 ethnically recognized nations united into one state. Cooperation between members of different nationalities in the workplace was promoted under the influence of Soviet administrative system, while the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, together with the corresponding public programs, has established the culture of interethnic harmony at the civic level [13]. Additionally, being collectivist in terms of culture, Kazakhstan places more importance on group cohesion than on individualism, which was usually the focus of previous diversity management researches [14].

The following paper can be complemented by an example from Kazakhstan itself. In their research on intercultural communicative competence among multicultural project teams of Kazakhstani-based multinational enterprises, Atakoziyeva et al. [15] found that positive attitudes to diversity and good communication competencies determine successful performance of the projects.

#### Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed above, nine hypotheses were formulated. H3, H4, and H5 follow conventional Western-based predictions from social categorisation theory; they are included precisely to test whether those predictions replicate in Kazakhstan:

H1: Cultural diversity is positively related to team performance.

H2: Cultural diversity is positively related to team communication quality.

H3: Cultural diversity is negatively related to team trust.

H4: Cultural diversity is positively related to team conflict.

H5: Cultural diversity is negatively related to team cohesion.

H6: Communication quality is positively related to team performance.

H7: Trust is positively related to team performance.

H8: Conflict is negatively related to team performance.

H9: Team cohesion is positively related to team performance.

#### Research design and data collection

A cross-sectional online questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms in March 2026. The sample was selected based on purposive-convenience sampling without any financial remuneration for participating in the study. The inclusion criterion entailed ongoing involvement in a project team consisting of at least three people. Every question on the form was obligatory; therefore, no missing answers emerged.

The tool was offered bilingually – in English and Russian – to capture the reality of a bilingual professional environment in Kazakhstan. In total, 103 valid responses were collected among professionals working in different industries: IT (18.4%), education (18.4%), chemistry and production (15.5%), finance and banking (11.7%), land cadaster and governmental services (15.5%), oil and gas (2.9%), and other areas (17.5%). As per gender, there were more women (54.4%) compared to men (45.6%). In terms of age, respondents were young (64.1% were aged 18–25, 16.5% – aged 26–35, and 15.5% – aged 36–45). As for group size, 3–5 people comprised 35.0%, 6–10 people – 28.2%, 11–20 people – 10.7%, and over 20 people – 26.2%.

One of the limitations inherent to the research is that it used non-probability sampling design; hence, the results will probably be representative of well-educated and urban individuals.

#### Measures and reliability

Measurement items for all constructs utilized five-point Likert scales. The construct of cultural diversity was measured through five items dealing with age, educational background, native language, work experience, and personal values drawn from existing measures [16, 17]. Communication quality was measured through five items on openness, information exchange, listening, accommodating language usage, and cultural sensitivity [17]. The concept of trust was operationalized through five items including reliability, honesty, psychological safety, respect, and competence [18, 19]. Three items measuring conflict frequency related to disagreements at work, personal problems, and cross-cultural issues (high scores indicated greater conflict frequency) were included [20]. The construct of cohesion was operationalized through five items related to collaboration, goal commitment, team identification, supportiveness, and teamwork [21]. Performance of the work group was measured by seven items assessing timeliness, quality, goals attainment, problem solving, innovation, stakeholder satisfaction, and continuous improvement [22, 23].

The reliability of measurement scales was estimated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All six coefficients exceeded .70, which is considered an acceptable level [24], while their minimum value (.837) and maximum value (.951) corresponded to conflict and performance, respectively.

### Data analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out in Jamovi 2.6 [25]. We first examined Pearson bivariate correlations to test H1–H9. We then ran simple linear regression (diversity predicting performance only) and multiple regression entering all five predictors simultaneously. We report both unstandardised (B) and standardised ( $\beta$ ) coefficients, as well as variance inflation factors (VIF) to assess multicollinearity. Basic regression assumptions were inspected via Q–Q plots and residual plots; no serious violations were detected.

## Results and discussion

### Descriptive statistics and reliability

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and bivariate correlations for all six study variables. Respondents perceived their teams as moderately diverse ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). Trust was the highest-rated construct ( $M = 4.08$ ), while conflict was the lowest ( $M = 2.30$ ), suggesting generally positive team climates with low interpersonal friction. Cohesion ( $M = 3.95$ ) and performance ( $M = 3.90$ ) were both rated above the scale midpoint.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations

Variable	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Diversity	3.58	1.11	.878	–					
2. Communication	3.96	0.91	.849	.492*	–				
3. Trust	4.08	0.94	.926	.448*	.771*	–			
4. Conflict	2.30	1.04	.837	.047	–.115	–.098	–		
5. Cohesion	3.95	0.91	.926	.478*	.745*	.770*	–.127	–	
6. Performance	3.90	0.90	.951	.463*	.595*	.660*	.018	.780*	–

Note.  $N = 103$ . \*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

### Bivariate correlations and hypothesis testing

Diversity correlates positively and significantly with performance ( $r = .463$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H1, and with communication quality ( $r = .492$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H2. Contrary to H3 and H5, diversity correlates positively with trust ( $r = .448$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and with cohesion ( $r = .478$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The diversity-conflict correlation is negligible and non-significant ( $r = .047$ ,  $p = .635$ ), failing to support H4.

Among the process-to-performance paths, cohesion shows the strongest bivariate association with performance ( $r = .780$ ), followed by trust ( $r = .660$ ) and communication ( $r = .595$ ), supporting H9, H7, and H6 respectively. Conflict is essentially unrelated to performance ( $r = .018$ ,  $p = .858$ ), so H8 is not supported.

### Regression analysis

In simple regression, diversity alone accounts for 21.4% of performance variance ( $R^2 = .214$ ,  $B = 0.378$ ,  $SE = .072$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Adding the four process variables in multiple regression raises the explained variance to 63.8% (Table 2). The only significant predictor in the full model is cohesion ( $B = 0.669$ ,  $\beta = .673$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The coefficient for diversity drops to  $B = 0.080$  and becomes non-significant ( $p = .181$ ) – a pattern consistent with full mediation through cohesion.

VIF values range from 1.12 to 3.82, well below the conventional threshold of 10, confirming that multicollinearity is not a serious concern. The non-significant negative coefficient for communication in the full model reflects shared variance among the three correlated positive process variables, not a genuine negative effect.

Table 2 – Multiple regression predicting team performance (DV)

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	VIF
Intercept	0.386	0.311	–	1.24	.217	–
Diversity	0.080	0.059	.066	1.35	.181	1.59
Communication	–0.065	0.105	–.066	–0.62	.537	3.81
Trust	0.155	0.104	.161	1.48	.142	3.82
Conflict	0.092	0.054	.106	1.71	.090	1.12
Cohesion	0.669	0.104	.673	6.41	< .001	3.64

Note. N = 103.  $\beta$  = standardised coefficient. VIF = variance inflation factor.  $R^2 = .638$ ,  $\Delta R^2$  vs simple regression = .424.

Table 3 – Summary of hypothesis testing

H#	Relationship	Direction predicted	r	p	Outcome
H1	Diversity → Performance	+	.463	< .001	Supported
H2	Diversity → Communication	+	.492	< .001	Supported
H3	Diversity → Trust	–	.448	< .001	Not supported (opposite)
H4	Diversity → Conflict	+	.047	.635	Not supported (n.s.)
H5	Diversity → Cohesion	–	.478	< .001	Not supported (opposite)
H6	Communication → Performance	+	.595	< .001	Supported
H7	Trust → Performance	+	.660	< .001	Supported
H8	Conflict → Performance	–	.018	.858	Not supported (n.s.)
H9	Cohesion → Performance	+	.780	< .001	Supported (strongest)

Note. n.s. = not significant. H3 and H5 show significant relationships in the direction opposite to the hypothesis. Although H1 is supported in bivariate correlation, the multivariate model shows diversity’s effect operates primarily through cohesion rather than independently.

#### Interpreting the positive diversity effects

The association between diversity and effectiveness (H1 supported,  $r = .463$ ), consistent with the information-processing approach [5], suggests that teams with diverse backgrounds and experiences seem to be better positioned to deal with the complex tasks inherent to project work in Kazakhstan’s knowledge economy. Moderately large effect size implies statistical and practical significance.

More importantly from the theoretical point of view, it can be stated that there is no statistically significant evidence for the null and reversed hypotheses, which would be consistent with the predictions of the social categorization theory [6] and the dominant paradigm of Western empirical studies on diversity [11]. Such results imply that, for some reason, social categorization mechanisms in Kazakhstan’s context are substantially weakened. In turn, there are several possible reasons behind such results.

First of all, the administrative heritage of the Soviet period led to the widespread practice of inter-ethnic cooperation in work-related activities; therefore, the “other” person within a project team does not necessarily activate out-group biases [13]. Second, official discourse of nation-building, according to which ethnic diversity is regarded as a national advantage, creates a favorable institutional framework for non-categorical relations in project teams (Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan and the state program “Kazakhstan – Our Common Home”). Finally, a collectivist orientation of Kazakhstan society, which emphasizes importance of cohesive interaction in contrast to individualist societies in which the double-edged sword effect has been discovered [14].

The above analysis is taken to suggest attenuation rather than total absence of the negative blade of the double-edged sword. At the same time, one cannot exclude the need for further testing the hypotheses on larger and more representative samples.

#### Cohesion as the mediating mechanism

Cohesion emerges as the only variable with a significant effect in the whole model, acting as the mediator in the relationship between diversity and performance ( $\beta = .673, p < .001$ ). The introduction of cohesion results in the disappearance of any direct effect diversity may have had, thus supporting a scenario of full mediation. It should be noted that since formal bootstrapping tests for mediation could not be conducted, owing to the small sample of 103 participants – below what is considered acceptable for SEM analysis [26] – convergent evidence is provided by both analyses.

If diversity rarely leads to friction within an organization, cohesion should be promoted to manage the process effectively. This has particular importance for project managers in Kazakhstan, where diverse ethnic backgrounds characterize the working environment.

#### Practical implications

From a project manager's perspective and that of an HR manager in Kazakhstan, the main conclusion to draw from the data presented above is that cultural diversity should be treated as a resource for the team. It is evident from the findings above that there is no need to spend money on training programs to prevent conflicts arising due to diversity. Instead, efforts should be made to increase cohesion by creating a common goal, reciprocal acknowledgment between people from different cultures, and interdependence among them [12].

### Conclusion

The present research aims at examining the existence of two faces of cultural diversity's impact on organizational performance, especially in Kazakhstan, and proves that the negative one is virtually nonexistent. Diversity leads to improved performance, more trust, better cohesion, and good communication without triggering any conflict. In multiple regression analysis, 63.8 percent of performance variance is explained by such predictor variables as cohesion, which plays the most important role and serves as the channel of diversity's influence on performance.

Three contributions can be made by this paper. First, theoretically, the adverse expectations based on social categorization theory seem to be true only for specific environments, such as collectivistic countries with institutions aimed at maintaining harmony. Second, empirically, this is the first quantitative study of diversity-performance relationship in Kazakhstani project teams, enriching a body of literature, which tends to be WEIRD-focused [12]. Finally, practically, the present findings imply a shift from trying to avoid conflict to striving for achieving cohesion.

Several limitations constrain the conclusions. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; reverse causality cannot be ruled out. Convenience sampling means the respondent pool over-represents younger, educated, urban professionals; findings may not generalise to more experienced or sector-specific populations. All measures are self-reported, introducing potential common-method variance; future work would benefit from multi-source data and objective performance metrics. The sample size ( $N = 103$ ) precluded structural equation modelling [26]; studies with  $N \geq 200$  could formally test the mediation. Comparative studies across Central Asian countries would help establish how much of what we found is specific to Kazakhstan versus the broader region.

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## **АЛУАНТҮРЛІЛІКТІ ТИІМДІЛІККЕ АЙНАЛДЫРУ: ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ ЖОБАЛЫҚ КОМАНДАЛАРДА ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚ ҚАНДАЙ НӘТИЖЕГЕ ӘКЕЛЕДІ**

### **Андатпа**

Зерттеу Қазақстандағы жобалық командалардың тиімділігіне мәдени алуантүрліліктің оң ықпал ететін-етпейтінін және бұл әсердің қандай механизмдер арқылы жүзеге асатынын анықтауға бағытталған. Ұйымдастырушылық зерттеулерде сирек қарастырылатын осы мәселені зерттеу мақсатында әртүрлі салалардағы 103 маманнан сауалнама деректері жиналып, мәдени алуантүрліліктің командалық процестерге (коммуникация, сенім, жанжал және ынтымақтастық) және команданың тиімділігіне әсеріне қатысты тоғыз гипотеза тексерілді. Нәтижелер мәдени алуантүрліліктің командалық тиімділікпен оң байланыста екенін растады ( $r = .463$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Бағыс елдерінде жүргізілген зерттеулердің нәтижелерінен айырмашылығы, мәдени алуантүрлілік сеніммен ( $r = .448$ ) және ынтымақтастықпен ( $r = .478$ ) оң корреляция көрсетті, ал жанжалмен статистикалық тұрғыдан мәнді байланыс анықталмады. Регрессиялық талдау нәтижесінде ынтымақтастық командалық тиімділіктің жалғыз маңызды болжаушысы болып шықты ( $\beta = .673$ ,  $p < .001$ ), ал толық модель тиімділік дисперсиясының 63,8%-ын түсіндірді. Сонымен қатар, ынтымақтастық айнымалысы модельге енгізілген кезде мәдени алуантүрліліктің тиімділікке тікелей әсері статистикалық мәнін жоғалтты, бұл толық медиацияның бар екенін көрсетеді. Авторлар Қазақстанның ұжымдық мәдениеті мен этносаралық келісімді мемлекеттік деңгейде институционализациялау мәдени алуантүрліліктің «екі жүзді семсер» тұжырымдамасында сипатталатын теріс әсерлерін айтарлықтай әлсіретеді деп болжайды. Зерттеудің практикалық қорытындысы бойынша, мұндай жағдайда ұйымдар үшін жанжалды басқаруға қарағанда, командалардағы ынтымақтастықты нығайтуға инвестиция салу анағұрлым тиімді.

**Түйін сөздер:** мәдени алуантүрлілік, топтың тиімділігі, ынтымақтастық, жоба менеджменті, Қазақстан, ұжымдық мәдениет, медиация.

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## **ПРЕВРАЩЕНИЕ РАЗНООБРАЗИЯ В РЕЗУЛЬТАТ: КАК СПЛОЧЕННОСТЬ ОПРЕДЕЛЯЕТ ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТЬ КАЗАХСТАНСКИХ ПРОЕКТНЫХ КОМАНД**

### **Аннотация**

В данной статье исследуется вопрос о том, способствует ли культурное разнообразие эффективности проектных команд в Казахстане – контексте, редко представленном в международных организационных

исследованиях, – и какой механизм при этом задействован. На основе данных опроса 103 специалистов из нескольких отраслей проверены девять гипотез о связях между разнообразием, командными процессами (коммуникация, доверие, конфликт, сплоченность) и результативностью. Результаты показывают значимую положительную связь культурного разнообразия с эффективностью ( $r = .463$ ,  $p < .001$ ). В отличие от паттернов, характерных для западных выборок, разнообразие положительно коррелирует как с доверием ( $r = .448$ ), так и со сплоченностью ( $r = .478$ ) и не имеет значимой связи с конфликтом. В модели множественной регрессии единственным значимым предиктором оказалась сплоченность ( $\beta = .673$ ,  $p < .001$ ); полная модель объясняет 63,8% дисперсии эффективности. Прямой эффект разнообразия при включении сплоченности в модель становится незначимым, что согласуется с полной медиацией. Мы полагаем, что коллективистская культура Казахстана и институционализируемая межэтническая гармония существенно нейтрализуют негативное «лезвие» метафоры двустороннего меча разнообразия. Практический вывод: в данном контексте инвестиции в формирование сплоченности команды, а не в управление конфликтами, являются более эффективным инструментом использования потенциала разнообразия.

**Ключевые слова:** культурное разнообразие, эффективность команды, сплоченность, управление проектами, Казахстан, коллективистская культура, медиация.