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AddSearch: managing culturally diverse global virtual teams in an internationalizing SME

Tiphaine Delecour and MacDonald Oguike

Case summary

Helena Rebane, Chief Executive Officer of AddSearch—a Finland-based small software company specializing in advanced content and product search solutions—was an exceptionally inclusive leader. Under her leadership, AddSearch had won the prestigious Finnish award ‘International Employer of the Year 2024’ in the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) category. AddSearch had already embedded diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices for managing global virtual teams; however, managing cultural diversity and time zones in a virtual work environment sometimes still created tensions. How could the management of global virtual teams in this SME be further improved? This case offers insights into inclusive leadership, employee onboarding and engagement challenges in a virtual work environment, and internal communication strategies using an enterprise social network (ESN). The case relates to Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and 10 (Reduced inequalities).

1. Joining from around the world

In the European Union (EU), small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been the backbone of the economy (Eurostat, 2024). A recent report from 2025 stated that there were approximately 26.1 million SMEs and their number was projected to grow by 1.2 per cent annually in 2024 and 2025 (European Commission, 2025). Among these, SMEs

working in advertising and market research have proliferated significantly (Eurostat, 2008), as more companies have begun to require the digital business development services they provide, to address market uncertainties created by socio-economic and global issues (Sutherland et al., 2024). While helping other firms to grow internationally, digital business development service providers have often become global from the day they were founded due to technological advancements in this space (Draskovic et al., 2024).

AddSearch—a Finland-based small software company specializing in advanced content and product search solutions—was one such SME that was ‘born’ global while helping others reach international markets. Thus, for Helena Rebane, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AddSearch, leading and managing such a primarily virtually operating business was a natural, but not always an easy task.

In January 2026, the AddSearch team, a melting pot of cultures, work experience, educational backgrounds, genders and ages, was gathering for their weekly meeting at 14:00 in Finland, Egypt and Turkey, 17:30 in Sri Lanka and India, 12:00 in the United Kingdom, 13:00 in Spain and Poland, and 21:00 in Australia.

For Helena, under whose leadership AddSearch had won the prestigious ‘International Employer of the Year 2024’ in Finland, it was common to meet with her teams in different time zones, but managing the onboarding, engagement and inclusion of the team was tricky. While Helena was a compassionate visionary who cared about work–life balance and created a company where global talents could flourish in a collaborative environment, balancing everyone’s needs was challenging at times. When entering this meeting, Helena was thinking: How can I ensure that we communicate with the team in the most efficient way? How can I make everyone feel included in our global virtual team?

2. AddSearch: a home for international talents

AddSearch was a software company headquartered in Finland, operating through a global virtual team (GVT) consisting of 17 professionals spread across eight countries and four continents: Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. This SME attracted diverse international talents thanks to its strategic choice of empowering remote employees. The company was recognized for its leadership in inclusive business management.

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Nevertheless, AddSearch still faced managerial challenges and tensions typical in global virtual work, such as miscommunication, teammates working in different time zones, diverse lifestyles and cultures, and conflicts in teams.

To address these challenges and tensions, Helena was constantly searching for solutions and best practices. For example, she allowed her employees to choose their workplace and hours but clearly stated a preference for Finland being the primary time zone:

[W]e try to mitigate obstacles by ensuring from recruitment they all know Finland is the main time zone for meetings and that there is freedom to travel, but with time zones, the less divergence the better. (Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch)

Teammates were always expected to greet each other in meetings and discuss culture, lifestyles and daily routines before considering the meeting's agenda. The tone used was always polite, bridging differences in communication preferences but directing the conversation so as to get answers on ongoing topics. Moreover, Helena had incorporated internal communication strategies, with an ESN, Slack and other digital tools, into daily practices to support inclusive communication within the virtual team.

3. Digital tools used for inclusive communication in the virtual SME

The tool Slack has been recognized for its facilitation of communication transparency, efficacy and quality (Stray and Barbala, 2024) in a virtual work environment. For example, at AddSearch, if someone needed an answer to a marketing question and asked in the dedicated Slack channel, Slack would send a notification to everyone in it, and the answer could then be provided by anyone. At AddSearch, every field, product and service, and team had their own Slack channel, where members could interact without limitations and exchange knowledge. Moreover, an individual was typically a part of multiple channels, thereby learning across functions and tasks. Helena saw such interaction as an organizational knowledge development tool:

Indirectly, this creates for us a database for similar questions to be answered before they are even asked, and sometimes there is no need to ask if the answer is somewhere in the old posts. (Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch)

The knowledge stored in this 'Question & Answer' database was a goldmine of information, available to employees, and reinforced the existing positive link between knowledge sharing and communication transparency (Chen et al., 2020). It also provided details of the company's operations and work tips.

However, communication challenges still existed at AddSearch. Questions asked were not always answered, the answers might have been unclear or incomplete, or they might have raised follow-up questions. Misunderstandings and lags due to time zones were also a problem. The use of digital interaction and meeting scheduling tools was also impacted by cultural diversity. Helena remembered:

[O]ne time, I had a meeting with a new recruit, but my calendar did not show it, and it took me 20 minutes to realize. When I joined late, I asked: 'Why did you not ping me?' It appeared that the employee considered that it was not possible to directly message the boss. (Helena Rebane, CEO of AddSearch)

To support inclusivity, Helena utilized a careful onboarding process. A technical onboarding provided access to all communication channels, files and explanations of their use. A social onboarding encouraged connection building and introduced the newcomer to the team.

4. Supporting diversity and inclusion in the GVT

It seemed that everything that could have been done was being done at AddSearch to enable inclusive, effective communication in the GVT. However, as Helena was entering the meeting, she was still thinking about the remaining challenges that persisted: miscommunication, occasional ineffective use of digital tools, task lags because of time zones... Helena therefore asked herself: How could I leverage diversity even better as a strategic asset for strengthening the firm's competitive advantage and avoid communication and work challenges in my GVT?

Questions for reflection

1. What aspects of diversity in teams could create differences and impact work practices in virtual SMEs like AddSearch?
2. What are some communication and inclusion challenges when working in a global virtual environment that can be recognized in this case?
3. What factors lead to effective work in a GVT? What are some tools or methods that facilitate open communication and reduce misunderstandings among team members, that are relevant for virtually operating SMEs? Which of these tools have already been implemented at AddSearch, and for what purpose?
4. How do the work practices and perspectives on diversity adopted at AddSearch relate to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and 10 (Reduced inequalities)? Read about these goals and discuss which specific targets of these goals are addressed by AddSearch.
5. How could AddSearch further develop its work practices to leverage diversity and ensure inclusion within its remote and multicultural team?

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