Superdiverse teams drive well-being in the workplace
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New research from ISS and Copenhagen Business School proves that highly diverse or superdiverse teams can increase well-being in the workplace. This is due to diversity’s potential for generating social coherence and enhanced socializing, communication, and open-mindedness among co-workers. As this study amply demonstrates, it is time to extend the traditional business case of innovation and enhanced problem solving to consider also how team composition that favours superdiversity can boost social well-being.
Executive summary

Studies from ISS have validated how diverse teams perform better than homogeneous teams (ISS, 2011) and found that diversity drives leadership development (ISS, 2017). This ISS study reveals how a high numerical representation of differences or superdiversity drives social well-being in the workplace by encouraging 1) solidary acts of mutual support based on supplementary skills and abilities, 2) enhanced communication and socializing, which are necessary for collaboration in a diverse environment, and 3) open-mindedness creating collaborative and social bonds across age, gender, and ethnocultural differences.
Background

Seemingly ubiquitous in contemporary organizations, a combination of diversity and teamwork is often theorized as instrumental in enhancing problem solving, innovation, and creativity based on diverse pools of knowledge and skills favouring a globalized market (Haas and Cummings, 2014; Paunova, 2016; Stahl et al., 2010; Tröster and van Knippenberg, 2012). That might be why literature on team diversity predominantly focuses on high-skilled labour in high-status jobs in the primary, capital-intensive sector, including multinational professional companies or academia (Adler and Aycan, 2018; Paunova, 2016; Tröster and van Knippenberg, 2012). This kind of research is often carried out in controlled environments using artificial situations, e.g. lab studies with student samples or large-sample quantitative studies, which are not fit to capture the complexities and social fabric of everyday organizational life (Adler and Aycan, 2018; Jonsen et al., 2011; Stahl et al., 2010). By the same token, a prevalent perspective within diversity scholarship is how to make women and ethnic minorities rise in a professional hierarchy that is dominated by white males (Lauring and Villesèche, 2017; Paunova, 2016).

This means we have a less elaborate understanding of how diversity unfolds in teams performing low-skilled service work in the secondary, labour-intensive sector. The service industry is defined broadly as comprising jobs which require little or no prior training and cluster at the low end of the wage scale with few mobility opportunities; it is a sector in which migrants in particular are overrepresented (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014; Ruiz et al., 2016). Hence the service sector is by far the sector characterized by the highest numerical representation of differences in terms of ethnocultural background, gender, age, citizenship and history in Denmark, tenure in the company, language skills, etc. – features that we also summarize as aspects of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). The present study examines exactly how these low-skilled service teams in the secondary sector are not characterized by the traditional diversity business case arguments of innovation and knowledge dynamics. Exploring diversity in service teams reveals other equally fruitful effects of diversity, which include well-being and prosocial behaviour being ignited by co-worker differences.

*Figure 1: The connection between diversity and well-being*
Case presentation and methods

We studied a highly diverse company, ISS, which has more than 118 nationalities represented among the 7,200 employees. Half of them have a non-Danish background. ISS is publicly recognized as a diversity champion in Denmark and has won numerous awards and prizes on account of this. Team diversity has for a long time been pivotal in ISS’s value proposition and recruitment, and diversity in teams is promoted as core to the company’s performance, with empowerment and employee development as central tenets. ISS rests on strong pro-diversity beliefs communicated in official value statements of how staff differences improve the company’s ability to service diverse customers and markets. One of the diversity programmes is designed to encourage a diverse composition of teams at every level in the organization (ISS, 2011), with a rule of thumb of a maximum of 70% of the same gender, generation, and national background in every team. This White Paper explores the benefit of adhering to the max-70% principle by demonstrating the organizational benefits of superdiversity in teams in terms of increasing well-being for the employees. Taking a qualitative approach, the article relies on an ethnographic study of 30 teams from May 2016 to June 2017. Data collection methods include participative observation, when a researcher was being trained as a new employee, and semi-structured interviews with ISS employees and leaders. All respondents and teams are kept anonymous (see appendix one for an overview of the data).
One of the most significant results from the research was how social coherence and well-being in teams we studied were nurtured by superdiversity – rather than taking place in spite of it. Let us give you some examples.

**a) Diversity nurtures solidary acts of mutual help and support among co-workers**

Differences were predominantly described as positive by both employees and managers in the teams we visited, resulting in better collaboration and prosocial behaviour among team members. We found many examples of how high degrees of differences impelled team members to engage in unilateral flows of assistance, ensuring fairness and an equal share of work among all team members. For example, younger members would help older team members with physically strenuous tasks; older members displayed concern about the younger members working too hard and provided ergonomic and practical advice based on their own experiences; and tenured workers would take on various tasks, like training new team members, drawing on their experiences.

A feature of superdiverse teams is language asymmetries or different linguistic backgrounds, which surprisingly serve to strengthen the development of solidary bonds. While mostly described as a team factor creating stress, frustrations, and negative emotions (Ciuk and Śliwa, 2017), in ISS linguistic differences were a source of skill development, by working in a second language (a way to develop), and through strengthened communication skills. The necessity of translation work based on language asymmetries served to strengthen social bonds and encourage use of alternative methods of communication: by physically demonstrating and working together to learn new tasks, ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ training, use of gestures and easy-to-read mimicry, and creatively applying Google Translate and demonstrative drawings and pictures. The need to work together to demonstrate execution of tasks...
because of language barriers strengthened empathy and demonstrated the intention to collaborate. Some teams would develop small dictionaries with translations of the most common professional concepts and tools together with social phrases. In one team, the sheer number of different nationalities made team members compete to pick up polite everyday phrases in a host of languages to greet each other, which heightened cross-cultural intelligence and added to the daily amusement. A cleaner described his team like this: “My colleagues are from all over the world: they are from Ukraine and other eastern countries like Poland, they are Africans and people from the Middle East, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and so on. In fact, we speak English, German and Arabic just as well as Danish. It is exciting with people from all over the world.” However, the need to have some command of Danish oral skills when working in ISS turned teams into Danish courses, where both managers and co-workers actively helped to strengthen language skills among newcomers, especially those with migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Diversity in terms of nationality also seemed to strengthen mutual assistance, not only in terms of language barriers but also in learning from each other. This furthermore created empowerment, as the different strengths, knowledge, and experience of the diverse team members made the products and services better: in a kitchen with many nationalities, this helped to create variation in the menu, with authentic food from all over the world, while multinational cleaning teams could communicate in many languages, benefiting especially when they were servicing multinational corporations. When everybody is different, all team members potentially contribute, with new and interesting skills enriching team collaboration. Hence superdiversity makes our different strengths and weaknesses more tangible, which makes it easier to recognize and acknowledge the unique contribution of every team member. Superdiversity thus facilitates mutual help and assistance, as every member’s skills are supplementary to those of their co-workers. Collaborating is then affiliated with learning from each other to the benefit of mutual recognition and inclusion in the team.

b) Diversity nutures communication and socializing

A second strong feature of well-functioning, superdiverse teams was team members’ voluntary investment in communication and socializing beyond working hours. Many of the teams we studied spent time getting to know each other over coffee, water, and lunch breaks. In one cleaning team, they all met up 30 minutes early so that they could take water and coffee breaks during the day. One of the members explained why: “Breaks are so important. It’s important that we sit together and just breathe. This is where I touch base with my colleagues. We talk about baby clothing and family events, cleaning techniques and machinery, and hear stories about holidays all over the world when people have been visiting family and friends in their former home countries. I learn so much about geography and politics in different countries from my colleagues.” Shared breaks were obviously a necessary part of making the team work, but in superdiverse teams, it was also out of sheer excitement to hear the many life stories and different experiences that members of a superdiverse team offer.
Meetings and breaks are a way to get to know each other and break down stereotypical perceptions. A cleaner arrived at the lunch table with long sleeves and a scarf, and her team members joked: “Are you cold, Aisha?” (It was a very hot summer day.) Aisha laughed and demonstrated how she had fastened the long sleeves to her ISS T-shirt so she would not have to wear two shirts. Breaks were occasions to get to know each other as individuals, disregarding one another’s positions in the team hierarchy: in a catering team, two Indian dishwashers talked about ‘India’s Got Talent’ while showing clips on their mobile phones, being the centre of attention and setting the agenda of small talk in the break.

Extensive communication and socialization not only tighten social unity but also allow team members to stand out as private, unique individuals. Through socializing and collaborating, the unique competencies and personalities of the single team members are manifested, recognized, and hence utilized.

c) Diversity nurtures open-mindedness

Leaders in charge of recruitment were often aware of the benefits of diversity. For instance, when asked about whether she prioritized diversity in relation to team composition, a leader of a catering team explained: “I definitely take nationality into consideration. If you have people from many countries, the team members are more equal and on a par with each other. It is best with ‘assorted candy’, and that’s because we always learn something from each other in terms of skills and behaviour. And mutual respect only arises if you are very different. If you have too many from the same country, then there will only be one set of culturally defined rules and norms prevailing.”

This study of ISS shows how a high number of members from different countries makes it difficult to divide group members into in- and out-groups, which benefits social coherence. What is even more interesting is that the leader explains that having many nationalities drives mutual respect, meaning that team members are more on a par. Hence status differences between high-status and low-status national groups, which teams with only two dominating national groups can fall prey to, might also be lessened by superdiversity (Paunova, 2018; Stahl et al., 2010). The sheer heterogeneity among team members, comprising multiple configurations of differences and multiple social boundaries within ethnic groups, opened possibilities of positive attachments across social identities, magnifying similarities in social circumstances, life situations, and linguistic capability, while minimizing stereotypical images and prejudice: when everybody is different, any assumption about the others would likely be inaccurate based on the extremely wide variation of cultural identities and individual life trajectories present in these heterogeneous teams.
Learning from superdiverse teams

Drawing on examples from observations and interviews with team leaders and members in over 30 teams from the cleaning and catering sections, our research reveals a virtuous circle between superdiversity and positive group dynamics of mutual help, boosting social cohesion and communication as well as reducing stereotypes among co-workers, all serving to improve well-being at work. This is in line with research dating back to the 1970s, when it was first shown that moving beyond a certain diversity threshold in the team can positively impact all group members by allowing them equal opportunity to influence team dynamics and group behaviour (Lauring and Villesèche, 2017). Even more interestingly, superdiverse teams seemed to help break down ethnocultural stereotypes and status differences based on nationality among team members, otherwise shown to be predominant in diverse teams (Paunova, 2016). As one leader of a cleaning team reflected: “When they [the team members] are more different, they become more inclusive and oriented towards all members of the team.”

The contribution of this study is twofold:

Firstly, studying superdiverse teams in one of Denmark’s most diverse organizations highlights how to exploit the obvious benefits of working in a multicultural workplace in a globalized labour market. In a situation of increasing mobility across borders of humans, goods, and capital, ISS shows the progressive aspects of a future, much-more-diverse labour market – in Denmark as well as internationally.

Secondly, this study of ISS demonstrates how diversity, which is usually seen as hindering solidarity and social coherence at a societal level (Holck and Muhr, 2017), can give rise to new forms of solidarity and social coherence – based, above all, on the sheer numerical representation of differences. Superdiversity impels team members to engage in unilateral flows of assistance and promotes a collective mindset, in which team members help each other and show understanding across generations and ethnocultural, linguistic, gender, and professional differences. Well-functioning superdiverse teams develop ways to navigate and cope with language challenges, stereotypical observations, and power struggles and hierarchies that might otherwise arise both in heterogeneous and homogeneous teams. Superdiversity means that each employee can bring valuable and unique skills and abilities to the team, contributing something special to the collective task solutions, which is then appreciated and recognized by the team.

Consequently, studying superdiverse teams in ISS supplements traditional business case arguments of innovation and knowledge utilization by demonstrating an equally important feature of diversity: social solidarity and well-being in the team. It follows that diversity does not only benefit high-skilled, knowledge-intensive teams, but also has a progressive perspective for teams in low-skilled service jobs – where superdiversity is a prominent feature of the team composition.
Implications for practice

Overall, this study shows the positive effect of superdiversity in teams. Consequently, human resource practices should be encouraged in that direction.

**Organizational level: pro-diversity values and policies**

At an organizational level, common values and pro-diversity policies can be implemented to develop open and inclusive attitudes in the form of strategies, appraisals, and reward structures. This study shows that positive diversity attitudes can be a result of high numerical representation of differences and informal interaction practices, but they can also be encouraged by the organization through formal policies, as in ISS: in ISS superdiversity reinforced the positive impact of pro-diversity corporate values, as some of the leaders’ and team members’ appraisals of team diversity reflected these, which again prompted them to engage in positive relations across different cultures and ethnicities with fellow team members.

Pro-diversity attitudes can be promoted through training and education: training of individuals’ diversity awareness has a documented positive impact on group behaviour, for example through acquiring knowledge about different cultures (Lauring and Villesèche, 2017). Emphasizing positive diversity attitudes as an important code of conduct and ensuring that organizational members behave in ways consistent with diversity values may improve the functioning of superdiverse teams.

**Leadership level: recruitment and socializing**

Top corporate leadership plays an important role in publicly reinforcing how diverse perspectives on work tasks and prosocial behaviour are valued in the organization, for instance by use of illustrative examples.

At a team management level, leaders must pay attention to the composition of their teams when recruiting new team members. This means that firms should be able to recruit from a larger talent pool and again contribute to fulfil both ethical and business objectives.

Leaders should also progressively encourage and help to develop openness to diversity in their teams, since this will affect team dynamics positively. One way to nurture prosocial behaviour is for team leaders to prioritize social events to allow their team members to become acquainted with each other. Since contact and interaction with people of a different background is known to decrease stereotyping and discrimination (Stahl et al., 2010), this should help to foster open-minded teams, whose members are curious about each other’s differences.

Overall, such elements could lead to better-performing diverse teams in a societal context in which an increasing number of migrants are joining the workforce at all hierarchical levels, and teams are becoming increasingly diverse.
Reference list


Appendix: Overview of data

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<td>cleaning and catering departments.</td>
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<td>Two intense case studies of teams in one location for 15 days.</td>
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<td>Semi-structured interviews with 25 managers and other employees.</td>
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Company profiles

Copenhagen Business School

Copenhagen Business School (CBS) was established in 1917. Today, with 20,000 students and 1,500 employees, CBS is one of the largest business schools in Europe and one of the 8 Danish universities. CBS aims to become a world-leading business university that recognises the vital role of business and the public sector in shaping society – and the equally important manner in which business practices and processes are shaped by society. At the core of our future development will be the training of students capable of contributing with innovation and entrepreneurship to high-level employment, and the creation of research which is both academically excellent and contributes significantly to finding new answers to societal challenges.

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