

Chapter 5

An Empirical Investigation of the Role of E-Communication in International Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the role of e-communication in international collaborations by examining its usage, cultural implications, and impact on trust building. Theoretically, this study is informed by social constructionism (Gergen, 1999; Goffman, 1959). Empirical insights were generated from the qualitative case study of WinCo which was an international collaboration between a UK-based wine and spirits multinational company and their distributors. The findings suggest that different e-communication channels are often used by collaborating partners to enhance the breadth and depth of their communication. New participants tend to enhance the skills of e-communication usage through self-learning, formal educational programs, and support from the company's employee development team. The widespread usage of e-communication impacts on partners' trust building in terms of their mutual perceptions of one another's competence and social bonding. National culture also affects partners' use of e-communication in international collaborative practice.

INTRODUCTION

International collaborations have become a favorable strategic vehicle for organizations to utilize in face of the competitive global economy (Cohen & Mankin, 2002; Harrigan, 1988). International collaborations are defined generally as inter-organizational collaborative relationships that cross national boundaries: examples include international supply chain networks, joint ventures, strategic partnerships, and alliances. There may be diverse motives of forming international collaborations, for example, market penetration, resource acquisition, product development, and knowledge transfer (Child & Faulkner, 1998). Regardless of the organizational motives, the fundamental assumption is that international collaborations can enable partnering organizations to gain advantageous situations which they cannot obtain by working alone.

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A major challenge for partnering organizations in international collaborations is how to coordinate and manage their collaborative relationships effectively with their counterparts who are often geographically dispersed (). Communication has been regarded as a key factor in the coordination and management process between partners. With the burgeoning development of information and communication technology (ICT), computer-mediated communication which is usually referred to as *e-communication* (EC) has been widely adopted (). The main channels of EC include emails, blogs, discussion forums and social media. The traditional face-to-face and telephone communication methods have been complemented by EC, which effectively facilitates partners' communication with significant savings in time and money and offers partners needed flexibility.

Despite the prevalence and potential of EC, there is still a lack of attention paid to its dynamics and unique characteristics in the context of international collaborations (Jean, Sinkovics, & Cavusgil, 2010; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001). The goal of this research is to extend knowledge on the role of EC in international collaborations. Drawing from the social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1999; Goffman, 1959), this research seeks to explore how EC is used by partners who work across organizational and cultural boundaries and how EC impacts on partners' collaborative relationship in international collaborations.

This chapter will be structured as follows. It begins with the discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and cultural implications of EC in international collaborations. This is followed by the presentation of research strategies utilized. Then research findings and discussions will be explained. The chapter will be concluded with research contributions, limitations and implications for future research.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Social Constructionist Theory

The theoretical influence of social constructionism on this research stems from its concern in relation to the constructive effects of discourse in creating and changing the social reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Social reality can be represented in different ways by individuals whose experience is discursively constituted (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). It indicates that language plays an active constructive role in the individuals' self-representations in various social contexts (Marshall, 1994). This social constructionist approach of multiple voices from the social reality stresses the multiple interpretations, which can be generated by researchers as well as the subjects researched. The above broad research field and the related issues imply the socially-constructed nature of collaboration because collaboration does not occur in a vacuum but in the processes of social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) between actors who develop definitions of a situation and then act according to those definitions (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p.15). The action in collaboration is constituted within and gains its intelligibility through actors' social interaction (Gergen, 1999). This theoretical perspective will be applied in the understanding of the partners' interaction which is mediated by the usage of EC in international collaborations.

EC and Trust Building within International Collaborations

The growth of EC (also known as the internet- and web-based technologies) has significantly transformed the way companies manage cross-border collaborative practice (Grosse, 2002; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Opportunities for international collaborations have been supported by EC as technology allows

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