

Chapter XI

A Training Design for Behavioral Factors in Virtual Multicultural Teams

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, factors “really” influencing virtual multicultural team work shall be described and a training design used for students and company members will be presented. So far, little attention has been paid to behavioural factors influencing virtual team work, or conclusions have been made from what is known about face-to-face teams. In this study, a bottom-up research with empirical data collected directly in the field, discovering such influences will be presented. With the help of grounded theory method factors influencing team members’ behaviour and team processes such as isolation, leadership, trust, commitment, conflict, information sharing, or culture will be described. A training design based on a real-time online business game which considers these factors provides a tool for acquiring the skills and abilities needed in virtual multicultural teams.

INTRODUCTION

Growing internationalization has created a need for communication across geographical boundaries and time zones via e-mail, chats on the Internet, Internet platforms, or videoconferences. These are the tools that facilitate the interaction between people in different geographical regions. At the

same time, virtual teams have become more and more common in the business world. According to Cohen and Gibson (2003), virtual teams can be defined as functioning teams whose members are geographically dispersed and whose communication is rather technology-mediated than face-to-face. As geographical distance is one of their key features, most of virtual teams are composed of

members from various cultures, and can therefore be termed “virtual multicultural teams.”¹

In the last few years, researchers have shown an increasing interest for this form of collaboration. Many studies focus on the specific characteristics of virtual teams, such as technological tools (e.g., Bélanger & Watson-Manheim, 2006; Duarte & Snyder, 2001; Riopelle et al., 2003) or communication (e.g., Pottler & Balthazard, 2002). Others deal with team processes and focus on issues such as team building (Beranek & Martz, 2005; Hart & McLeod, 2003; Huang, Wei, Watson, & Tan, 2002) or team performance (e.g., Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003; Lawler, 2003; Levenson & Cohen, 2003). Others simply provide “best practices” (e.g., Lurey & Raisinghani, 2000; Kirkman, Gibson, & Shapiro, 2001; Staples & Webster, 2007). So far, little attention has been paid to behavioural factors (i.e., factors having an impact on or resulting from team members’ behaviour and team processes) influencing work in virtual teams. Researchers have only built their arguments on the assumption that such factors were of importance. This means that they considered a particular influence to be of importance in virtual teams and built their arguments or empirical studies around it. Other authors drew normative conclusions from face-to-face teams and provided (theoretical) links to virtual teams. Among these trust (e.g., Castelfranchi & Tan, 2001; Duarte & Snyder, 2001; Gibson & Manuel, 2003; Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002; Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006), leadership (e.g., Davis, 2003; Duarte & Snyder, 2001; Lähteenmäki, Saarinen, & Fischlmayr, 2007; Tyan, Tyan, & Shepherd 2003; Zigurs, 2003), or conflict (Griffith, Mannix, & Neale, 2003; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2007) are dealt with most frequently. Regarding the crucial issue of culture, some attempts at stating its influence on virtual collaboration have only been made recently (e.g., Fischlmayr, 2006; Gefen & Heart, 2006; Huff & Kelley, 2005; Staples & Zhao, 2006). All in all, there is not only a shortage of theoretical knowledge based on empirical studies

(c.f., Hertel, Geister, & Konrad, 2005), but also a need for the training of the skills required in virtual multicultural teams (e.g., Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2006).

So far, there has not been any attempt to look at those factors in a “bottom-up-process,” and therefore the aim is to learn more about the influencing factors directly from the field and not to assume factors to be of importance and to conduct a follow-up study later on. Virtual team projects among business students from different universities (two European and one Canadian) have served to put a light on behavioural influences. After experiencing team processes in virtual multicultural teams, essays about their learnings have been written. During the analysis of these narratives the factors influencing team processes and team members’ behaviour were discovered. Therefore, this study is unique in that it uses a “bottom-up” approach based on empirical data directly from the field instead of starting out with a set of hypothetical influential factors. Furthermore, the factors build a basis for creating a training design for members participating in virtual multicultural teams.

In this chapter, factors “really” influencing virtual multicultural team work will be described. Based on these factors, a training design used for students and company members will be presented.

BACKGROUND

During several semesters, virtual team projects (participating schools: Richard Ivey School of Business, London, Ontario, Canada; ESADE, Barcelona, Spain; Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria) were conducted where business students could gain insight and experiences in virtual multicultural collaboration. The courses focused on topics from cross-cultural management and similar issues within international management. The instructors assigned their students to specific teams which ensured a mixture of cultures in all

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