



Chapter V

Bridging Diversity across Time and Space: The Case of Multidisciplinary Virtual Teams

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Abstract

The uniqueness of multidisciplinary teamwork is in its potential to integrate different bodies of knowledge into a new synergy. However, previous empirical studies have shown that member heterogeneity and geographic separation hinder effective sharing and use of team knowledge. The chapter explores how such teams interact to overcome the barriers and take advantage of their “built in” knowledge diversity. The findings indicate that often teams lack common background knowledge at the beginning of the projects, and in order to resolve differences members rely on their external intellectual and social communities. The reported

research establishes a positive correlation between team members' participation in multiple professional and social networks and teams' abilities to successfully build on their knowledge diversity. The findings also suggest a need to reconceptualize the boundaries of multidisciplinary teams and to consider the processes of sharing diverse knowledge in a wider social context.

Introduction

With the intensification of globalization and expansion in the use of information technology, particular attention is being focused on the opportunities and difficulties associated with sharing knowledge. The exponential growth of knowledge has made it nearly impossible for any organization to exist in isolation. Thus, the networked organization or alliance is becoming an increasingly common structural form (Leonard, Brands, Edmondson, & Fenwick, 1998). Such networked organizations are usually described as collections of organizations and individuals that have entered into collaborative relations, usually involving multiple channels of communication and knowledge diffusion across disciplinary and organizational boundaries. Previous studies variously refer to such new organizational arrangements as “virtual organizations,” “spider’s web,” “holonic enterprise,” “smart organizations,” and so forth. Although all describe new ways of organizing that enable people and teams to work across conventional boundaries, there are apparent variations in key characteristics.

A defining component of the virtual organizations, for example, is that they are information computer technology (ICT) enabled (Mowshowitz, 1994) and based on computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Therefore, CMC is a powerful tool to overcome time and distance barriers. It has been recently argued, however, that virtual organizational forms emphasize only one element of what is required from organizations in the digital economy (Filos & Banahan, 2000). To be able to respond to the challenges of the new global marketplace, the organizations have to be not only technologically enabled, but more importantly “smart” in their abilities to enter into virtual collaborations with other partner organizations and share diverse occupational and cultural knowledge. Such “smart organizations” have been described as “organizations that are knowledge-driven, internetworked, dynamically adap-

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