Chapter VII

Newcomer Assimilation in Virtual Team Socialization

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ABSTRACT

Socialization of newcomers in traditional organizations has been given considerable attention in the literature. However, little attention has been paid to how individuals are socialized in virtual teams. Examined in this chapter is the critical stage of organizational assimilation for newcomers in virtual teams and how this stage differs for traditional organizational socialization. Specifically, we address newcomer relationship development and virtual team metamorphosis. Recommendations for effective virtual team socialization are offered as well as areas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The sophistication of communication technology and the globalization of organizations greatly accelerated the growth and importance of virtual teams in the workplace. Teleworking and virtual teams are becoming more commonplace for several reasons — often it is more efficient, less expensive, and less technologically difficult to organize geographically dispersed workers. When employees work in teams and communicate only via technology rather than face to face, the socialization process may be altered because of the technological mediation of communication.

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It is well known that communication is important to socialization into teams. For example, early in a job, newcomers concentrate on gathering information, learning about the tasks necessary for the job, and clarifying their roles in the team. To acquire information and learn about the new setting, newcomers frequently rely on a variety of sources within the team, such as peers, supervisors, and mentors (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Schein, 1988).

How well an individual is socialized into a team can determine his or her success within it and, ultimately, the team’s success in achieving goals and objectives. Team socialization and the communication practices associated with that socialization have been researched extensively since Jablin (1982) first explored the intricate process. Socialization occurs when a member of a team acquires the knowledge, behavior, and attitude needed to participate fully as a member of that team. Jablin (1987) described the stages of socialization that occur as one enters an organization as anticipatory socialization, organizational assimilation (encounter and metamorphosis), and organizational exit. Unlike the abundance of research in traditional team socialization, research in the area of virtual team socialization is only now beginning to emerge (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). The focus of this chapter is to explore how information technologies mediate communication in virtual teams, and, as a result, impact socialization processes.

A virtual team is defined as a group of geographically and organizationally dispersed workers brought together across time and space through information and communication technologies (DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). The challenge for virtual team socialization lies with the fact that team members communicate primarily via electronic mail, telephone, and videoconferencing or computer conferencing. Because most of the communication in virtual teams is mediated, the processes involved in socialization of virtual teams may be different from traditional face-to-face (F2F) teams. However, organizations seldom differentiate between building virtual and traditional teams, assuming that the stages of socialization for colocated teams are the same as those for virtual teams.

Mediated communication is different than F2F communication. For example, interaction in mediated groups appears more impersonal, task-oriented, less friendly, and more businesslike (Rice & Love, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). In addition, communication technologies can limit and complicate the process of developing virtual teams. For example, Mark (2001) stated that communication delays and awkwardness in turn taking can impact the communication process of team building. However, rather than viewing computer-mediated communication as limiting, Walther (1996) suggested that technologies can facilitate communication by providing opportunities for anonymity, 24-hour access, and archiving. Thus, the communication technologies transform the critical role that interpersonal communication plays in the socialization of virtual teams.
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