Chapter 6.19
Effective Virtual Working through Communities of Practice

Chris Kimble
University of York, UK

Feng Li
University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is an issue currently affecting many organizations and is one that has profound consequences for the nature of work (Karimi & Konsynski, 1991; Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1992; Sachs, 1995). In order to work effectively in an international setting, companies are increasingly turning to trans-national teams (Castells, 1996; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997).

In the new, networked economy, knowledge is seen as an asset that needs to be managed and is central to the success of organizations (Boersma & Stegwee, 1996). Since the 1980s, many organizations have taken steps to outsource and downsize in an effort to remain competitive (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; O'Dell, 1998). More recently, international outsourcing, often known as off-shoring, has been happening at a rapid pace in a growing range of activities and sectors. Outsourcing, off-shoring, downsizing and programs of planned redundancy all mean that, as people leave, they take with them a valuable stock of corporate knowledge. This can be knowledge of how the work is done in practice and domain knowledge (Sachs, 1995). Some knowledge is easy to replace, but the knowledge of how a company operates is built over years and is irreplaceable in the short term.

In addition, many organizations now have to cope with the increasing internationalization of business that forces collaboration and knowledge-sharing across geographical boundaries. Working in a more internationalized setting places strains on the way a team operates, as they have to cope not only with geographical distance, but also time,

culture and possibly language barriers. For such organizations, there is an urgent need to identify ways to work effectively in such groups.

BACKGROUND

The following sections of the article will introduce four key concepts used in the analysis of such environments: Virtual Workgroups; Distributed Collaborative Working; the distinction between Physical Space and Electronic Space; and finally, Communities of Practice.

Virtual Workgroups

The concept of virtual working is not clearly defined and can include such overlapping concepts such as the virtual or networked organization, the virtual workplace, virtual communities, electronic commerce, virtual teams and teleworking (e.g., Igbaria & Tan, 1997). At the most basic level, any workgroup that has members spread across several different locations could be characterized as virtual.

In this article, we will discuss workgroups that operate in the environment outlined in the intro-

duction. Symon (2000) describes such a setting as an Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-enabled post-bureaucratic network organisation. Such groups can be classified along three dimensions (Kimble, Li, & Barlow, 2000): the organizational level (same organization or different organization), the temporal level (same time zone or different time zone) and physical proximity (same place or different place).

Distributed Collaborative Working

Distributed Collaborative Working (DCW) is a form of social organization facilitated by ICT. The work is distributed either physically (e.g., carried out in different places) or temporally (e.g., carried out at different times). It can involve modes of working that are wholly synchronous, wholly asynchronous or multi-synchronous (where several activities proceed in parallel) (Dourish, 1995). It is also collaborative work, as it involves groups of people working toward a common end.

DCW is sometimes further broken into "Cold" and "Hot" DCW to reflect the different types of work that take place. Cold DCW comes about when the work being done is part of a collective activity, but is performed autonomously. For example, Kindberg, Bryan-Kinns and Makwana

Table 1. Background information on the case studies

	Main Activity	Location	Organisation	Time	Place
Company 1	Software support	UK	Different	Same	Both
Company 2	Software development	UK	Both	Both	Different
Company 3	Software development	UK	Different	Both	Different
Company 4	Law firm	Germany	Same	Same	Same
Company 5	Secretarial services	France	Both	Same	Different
Company 6	Research/consultancy	Italy	Same	Both	Same
Company 7	Market research	UK	Different	Both	Different
Company 8	Medical services	UK	Same	Same	Different
Company 9	Medical services	Greece	Same	Same	Different
Company 10	Phone enquiries	Portugal	Different	Same	Different

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