Chapter 8
Status and Influence Processes in Virtual Teams and Mobile Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

Communication between members of decision-making teams has long been known to be strongly influenced by member status. However, we still know relatively little about how status and status-driven influence processes change with the implementation of technologically-mediated virtual teams and mobile collaborative enterprises. Early predictions were that technologically-mediated communication would essentially flatten the status hierarchy of groups and teams (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), allowing all members, regardless of position, social identity, or other characteristics, to have equal access to the decision-making process. A review of relevant theoretical approaches and prior empirical findings indicates that in all likelihood, status processes and influence are maintained in these settings, at least in some cases to the detriment of team effectiveness. This chapter examines, through the manifestations and functions of interpersonal status, the effects of technological mechanisms of collaboration on communication processes, relationships, and practices.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration conducted via computer-mediated technologies has often been acclaimed for the potential it holds to provide avenues for participation on the part of all members of an aggregate (Anson & Munkvold, 2004). This participation is particularly important because knowledge held in such aggregates is considered to be a distinctive competence (Harvey, Novicevic, & Garrison, 2004). As compared to face-to-face groups, theoretically, teams operating virtually should be better able to facilitate broad member input in that status cues, and in some cases, even status characteristics, are not available (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003). Turn-taking no longer dictates who will speak, normative pressure for conformity is reduced, and everyone involved should have access to the same

information via the technological system used by the team.

As organizations move into the next evolution of technology-facilitated collaboration, once again, barriers appear to be coming down with regard to influence and participation. Mobile phone-style devices are rapidly becoming the locus of technology-mediated communication, and ultimately, all who have such a device will have access, from virtually any location, to their co-workers and internet-stored information and software. Availability of information continues to increase, and presumably, access to individual members of a collaboration is increasing as well.

However, the presumed equalization (or merit basis) of influence is unlikely to occur without intervention, despite these technological changes. As noted by Wallace (2004), "the idea [use of the internet] was to make distance unimportant to teamwork," but "it did not quite work out that way" (p. 159). The purpose of this chapter is to examine, from a theoretical perspective, how technological mediation interacts with the differential status of team members to influence team communications, relationships, and practices. I argue that despite increasing access to the information and technology needed to participate in such collaborations, there are still real and relevant psychological and sociological barriers to influence for low-status members that are either not affected by or actually facilitated by these communication technologies and their common usage.

In the following background section, I initially review relevant theory regarding communication and distance. Secondly, essential elements of basic theories of identity and status are introduced. Lastly, I provide an overview of key research in the area of virtual teams.

BACKGROUND

Theories of Organizational Communication

Organizational communications have been subject to theorizing from a variety of perspectives. In general, Carlson and Zmud (1999) provide a three-pronged typology organizing this body of thought. First, researchers address what characteristics influence choice and use of particular types (channels) of communication. Secondly, studies may focus on how specific types of communication are used. Thirdly, perceptions generated from the use of different types of communication are particularly important in developing an understanding of how technology changes interpersonal interaction. I draw to some extent on all three of these areas, but focus here on two key well-known theories: social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986), both of which fall into the last category, and argue for varying effects on group process based on the type of communication media utilized.

Social presence is a term used by Short, et al. (1976) to indicate the extent to which a person with whom one is interacting is salient. Many non-verbal cues may be comprised by social presence (e.g., facial expression), but a central issue is the extent to which the focal person is aware of or processing the relationship with the other, as opposed to simply carrying out individually-generated task-oriented behavior. Thus, it is anticipated that when social presence is low (awareness of the other is not salient), less effort is generated toward being socially appropriate, sensitive to the relationship, or interpreting messages beyond literal meaning. Social presence is typically cast as a quality of the medium of communication; that is, if the medium is audio-only, one would have little opportunity to read non-verbal cues, and would have less sense of the presence of the other.

Media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986) provides another approach to evaluating channel features,

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