

# Chapter 14

## Power and Trust in the Virtual Workplace: Team Development as Communities-of-Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*How we work in an increasingly computer-mediated world requires new ways of understanding the construction of teams, their co-construction of tacit knowledge to make sense of the organization, and their use of emergent technologies. We posit an alternative research perspective—that of the communities of practice construct—allows a fuller understanding of the relationships of power and trust in team behaviors and processes. The communities of practice model provides an avenue to examine the intricate dance that trust and power perform in virtual environments, with people as the focal point. It is how people interact with each other, with in technology, to be or become successful virtually that is the focus of this chapter. We explore trust and power in virtual or blended work environments using a reflexive autoethnographic narrative, comprised of three case studies, grounded in the larger context of the organizational communication literature.*

### INTRODUCTION

*“One should expect trust to be increasingly in demand as a means of enduring the complexity of the future which technology will generate” (Luhmann, 1979, p. 16).*

Organizations formally codify and informally communicate explicit knowledge with varying levels of effectiveness. However, tacit knowledge—such as operational knowledge, decision-making judgment in the absence of data, or interpersonal skills embodied in individuals—is not easily achieved. The tacit knowledge of each team member must

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be accessible for knowledge creation to occur (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Although work teams contain jobs that are interrelated through project tasks and milestones, they also contain a social structure linking the individual team members in such a way that successful completion of each member's job is necessary to achieve larger goals and desired outcomes.

In an increasingly complex environment, we posit that teams function as *de facto* communities-of-practice. They exhibit three characteristics: (1) valuation of work roles, (2) the degree of participation in "peripheral" learning permitted under working conditions, and (3) opportunities for participation in innovative implementations (Wenger, 1998). Virtual work is such an innovation. It requires members to engage creatively in new ways of working. Hence, members learn through praxis (Brown & Duguid, 2002). Teams range the gamut from physically collocated teams (everyone in the same space/place), blended teams (people located in both physical place and virtual space), and virtual teams (everyone in virtual space). For the purposes of this chapter, the use of the phrase virtual teams may also be considering blended teams. All teams use a variety of technologies to work and to innovate.

However, the real innovation in virtual work is in communication, not technology. Technology can make communication faster and more efficient. Unfortunately, technology does not enhance the social interaction required by team members to clarify, create, or trust. For it is the communication of both the explicit and the tacit knowledge possessed by an organization and its members that is the critical challenge in the transition to or blending of virtual and physical work (Belanger & Allport, 2008; Polyani, 1966). Because of this, within daily team praxis are embedded the relationship and the contextualization of power and trust.

Effective communication in blended work teams requires trust, as "Virtuality requires trust to make it work: Technology on its own is not enough" (Handy, 1995, p. 44). This "trust rela-

tionship" is constructed through the content and frequency of formal and informal content communication (Panteli & Duncan, 2004). Trust not only enables cooperation, it also becomes the means for complexity reduction or disambiguation (Eisenberg, 2007). Trust is especially valuable in alliances, such as inter-firm, joint ventures, or contracted work, because firms, teams, and individuals rely on their partners' performance and are vulnerable to partners' actions (Kumar, 1996).

However, as part of an analysis of trust, we suggest it is imperative to consider power. Power is an important contextual factor. Power creates unilateral dependencies or unbalanced relationships. These affect the trust of a team with its organization, as well as among team members or the team members and team leader. Bachmann (2001) suggests that trust and power together are the means of coordinating organizational relationships at the interpersonal and the structural levels. If that is true, how does one make sense of virtual work, trust, and power within a communication framework of praxis and theory? That is the goal of this chapter.

We begin with a theoretical overview of the research on virtual teams, quickly segueing into a review of power and trust. After the more traditional literature review and analysis, we then offer a narrative of our individual experiences as members of virtual teams. We believe this narrative (autoethnographic) approach as virtual workers *and* as researchers writing this chapter allows us to provide a more integrative, analytic perspective of theory and praxis. After all, if narratives are sites for the production of situated 'accountings-for' (explaining why we behave the way we do), then narrative as data gives us privileged insights into how people conceptualize and engage in relationships (Baker, 2004). The narrative is comprised of three lived experiences. The first narrator was one of four virtual employees in a business unit of a large corporation based in multiple locations. The second narrator explores the experiences of a national software training team as they navigate the

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