



Chapter II

Lessons Learned Crossing Boundaries in an ICT-Supported Distributed Team

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ABSTRACT

Most so-called virtual teams are virtual by degree only. The dichotomy of face-to-face versus virtual teams is a research-led phenomenon. Many teams are using combinations of face-to-face communication and ICT, and can be considered transitional or semi-virtual teams. Many of these teams cross multiple boundaries, including those of time, distance, organization and culture. This paper takes an in-depth look at one such ICT-supported distributed team and investigates some of the key issues that arose as it operated across multiple boundaries, in particular ethnic cultural boundaries. This paper answers recent calls for more in-depth and creative cross-culturally framed information systems research, and the findings suggest that while traditional notions of culture are still valuable for lending insight into team member behavior, team culture may also be seen as emergent and negotiated based on a wide range of contextual elements. The paper concludes with an analysis of the important practical lessons learned in this case. The implications for cross-cultural IS research are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to contribute to the general field of cross-cultural research in information systems by looking at the issues that arose in a multiple boundary crossing ICT- (information and communication technology) supported distributed team. It responds to the need for more research on how team leaders and members effectively respond to increasingly 'virtual' interactions. The paper takes an in-depth look at how one team leader, who led a transitional ICT-supported team, perceived the wide variety of challenging issues associated with the completion of a critical multi-organizational task in a distributed team environment. This case focuses particular attention on the selection and use of communication channels in building relationships and completing tasks across multiple boundaries, particularly ethnic cultural boundaries. This paper responds to recent calls for more in-depth and creative cross-culturally framed information systems research (Hunter, 2001; Meyers & Tan, 2002).

The case presented in this paper is unique not only for the insights gained into transitional teams and boundary crossing, but also in the nature of the research methodology, grounded action learning. This methodology allowed the team leader in this case the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate his experiences (along with other team leaders). His intention was to assist his organization in gaining a greater understanding of transitional ICT-supported teams and developing strategies to increase their use and effectiveness in the organization while at the same time gauging the consequences of their use across organizational and ethnic cultures.

This section will look at the use of ICT in organizational teams, the notion of cross-cultural relationship building, and leadership in ICT-supported teams. This is followed by a description of the methodology and its appropriateness in cross-culturally framed information systems research. The issues encountered by the team and the team leader's reflections and observations are then presented in a narrative case form, illustrated with the team leader's words. The paper concludes with an analysis highlighting the important practical lessons learned in this case, as well as the implications for the organization featured in this case and other organizations at large. The implications for cross-cultural IS research are briefly discussed.

Transitional ICT-Supported Teams

Fulk and DeSanctis (1995) discussed five key developments that have led to the possibilities of richer, more complex communication in organizations: increased speed of communication, dramatic reduction in communication costs, increased communication bandwidth, vastly expanded connectivity, and integration of communication with computing technologies. These developments have made the use of transitional ICT-supported teams not only possible, but also prevalent in today's organizations.

The term transitional ICT-supported team refers to organizational teams that have traditionally operated in a face-to-face context and are now increasingly engaged in virtual communications supported by a wide range of ICT including e-mail, teleconferencing, mobile technology, the Internet, videoconferencing and the like. These technologies enable team members to communicate more effectively and efficiently. For example, e-mail can allow team members to improve response times; e-mail attachments and Internet/intranet-based Web pages can disseminate information more quickly, and Web-

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