

Chapter 33

Promoting Global Virtual Teams across the Globe: Cross-Cultural Challenges and Synergies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a preliminary understanding of cross-cultural challenges and synergistic experiences of multicultural students engaged in Global Virtual Teams (GVTs). In this case study, we introduce the GVT structure as a novel learning platform which utilizes Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools as part of its virtual-based learning. We administer the case study with 30 students (n=30) in the United of Emirates (UAE) who engage in GVTs across the globe—encompassing 26 universities and 22 countries. Qualitative data is collected in the form of documents—reflective reports of the students' experiential learning over a 10-week period. We content analyse the reports based on the thematic analysis with two distinctive categories—cultural challenges and cultural synergies based on the first seven weeks of the experiential learning process. In this study, we find that students experienced challenges such as managing technical difficulty, language barriers, deteriorating motivations, geographical distance, time differences, and non-committed and unresponsive attitude. However, students also experience synergies from the GVTs such as strong relationships and continued friendships, formation of emergent leadership, learned diverse managerial styles and competencies skills, varied use of varied CMC tools, and international exposure to diverse cultures without the need to travel abroad.

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INTRODUCTION

Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) are becoming the most widespread and innovative working structure in Multinational Corporations (MNCs). GVTs are composed of people from different cultural backgrounds, working at a distance, collaborating using varied communication technologies to achieve their goals, and who often have no historical work relationship (Mohd Yusof & Zakaria, 2012). The availability of new information and communication technologies combined with increasing pressure for globalization is driving the growth of GVTs. In addition, a new social context also arises in GVTs, since the ability to share knowledge is no longer constrained by geographical distance and time.

When considering GVTs, one must recognize such teams differ in many aspects from traditional teams. GVTs fundamentally diverge on two distinct dimensions—the sophistication of their communication tools, and the time spent working apart (Griffith & Neale, 2001; Powell et al., 2004; Fuller, Hardin, & Davison, 2006; O’Leary & Cummings, 2007). The purest GVT is the one which collaborates while team members are situated in different locales, totally working apart, and depending entirely on computer-mediated communication tools. Thus, there are some inevitable challenges in building a sustainable learning and knowledge-sharing base between diverse members of GVTs. For instance, it is clearly noted in several studies that this type of virtual collaboration results in heightened challenges for organizations to manage due to cross-cultural differences and such teams also differ on managerial requirements and strategies from the onset and throughout the team’s life cycle (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Furst, Reeves, Rosen & Blackburn, 2004; Montoya, Massey, & Lockwood, 2011). Yet the advantages of such teamwork continue to be promoted in multinational organizations because of its significant work structure (Araujo & Chidambaram, 2008; David, Newell, & Resende-Santos, 2008; Griffith & Neale, 2001).

Distributed Work Structure

Empirical studies have examined the emergent structure of GVTs, but limited research has fully examined the impact of culture on GVT effectiveness (Evaristo, 2003; Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006; Shachaf, 2008; Zhang, Lowry, Zhou & Fu, 2007; Zhang & Lowry, 2008). The understanding of what is the cross-cultural challenges and how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of GVTs around the world has not received sufficient attention, particularly from scholars in interdisciplinary fields such as information technology and information systems, CMC, cross-cultural management, and international management. The increasing use of GVTs in MNCs strongly implies these and similar emerging work structures are, and will continue to be, heavily dependent on electronically collaborative tools such as e-mail, videoconferencing, teleconferencing, instant messaging, chat, and many more (Zakaria & Abdul Talib, 2011; Weimann, Hinz, Scott, & Pollock, 2010).

With these tools, additional problems and challenges will emerge when managing a distributed work structure, including the many complex dimensions of cultural values. For instance, problems with communication and collaboration using CMC will surface because not all people are comfortable working with others through a medium with limited non-verbal cues such as email. Yet many people find email an efficient tool to operate across the globe despite its technological limitations (DeLuca & Valacich, 2006). Indeed, with the rise of the global market and the global information society, it is likely that workers will encounter more, and more different, cultures than ever before.

In this chapter, the purpose of our study is to examine the significance of working in GVTs as a new educational platform in providing practical knowledge. We will explore the phenomenon of collaborating with team members who are totally ‘strangers’ to each other—thus introducing twofold of experiential learning and experiences—cross-

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