Managing Relationships in Virtual Team Socialization

Shawn D. Long
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

Gaelle Picherit-Duthler
Zayed University, UAE

Kirk W. Duthler
Petroleum Institute, UAE

INTRODUCTION

The traditional organizational workplace is dramatically changing. An increasing number of organizations are employing workers who are physically and geographically dispersed and electronically dependent on each other to accomplish work (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003). Recent technological advances, combined with more flexible job design, have helped increase the number of people working in distributed environments. Hence, more employees are working individually and on teams that seldom, if ever, meet face to face. These virtual employees have the same work responsibilities as traditional employees in addition to the challenge of operating within the dynamics of these newly designed mediated workplaces.

Rapid developments in communication technology and the increasing influence of globalization and efficiency on organizations have significantly accelerated the growth and importance of virtual teams in contemporary workplaces. Virtual teams are becoming more commonplace because of the possibilities of a more efficient, less expensive, and more productive workplace. Additionally, distributed teams are less difficult to organize temporal organizational members than traditional co-located teams (Larsen & McInerney, 2002; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001; Piccoli & Ives, 2003).

Although there are apparent advantages of organizing work virtually, the challenge for new member integration lies in the fact that team members must communicate primarily through communication technology such as electronic mail, telephone, and videoconferencing or computer conferencing. This increased dependence on technology as a medium of communication significantly alters the way new members are socialized to work teams. Additionally, team members' ability to use complex communication technologies varies across individuals. This variation potentially may lead to inter- and intra-group conflict, as well as creating organizational work ambiguity, which refers to the existence of conflicting and multiple interpretations of a work issue (Miller, 2006). This article addresses the challenges of virtual team socialization with regard to newcomer assimilation and how newcomer encounter is an embedded process of virtual team assimilation.

BACKGROUND

Effective communication is central to organizational and team socialization. The way individuals are socialized in a team may determine his or her success within the team and the successful achievement of organizational and team goals. Team socialization and the communication practices associated with newcomer integration have been researched extensively (e.g., Brockmann, & Anthony, 2002; Lagerstrom & Anderson, 2003) since Jablin (1982) first explored this multilayered process. Socialization occurs when a newcomer of a team acquires the knowledge, behavior, and attitudes needed to participate fully as a member of that team. Jablin (1987) framed the stages of socialization as anticipatory socialization, organizational assimilation (encounter and metamorphosis), and organizational exit. Although there is an abundance of literature on traditional organizational socialization, research on virtual team socialization is beginning to emerge (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Picherit-Duthler, Long, & Kohut, 2004; Long, Kohut, & Picherit-Duthler, 2004).

NEWCOMER ASSIMILATION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Organizational assimilation is perhaps the most important, yet complicated, stage of virtual team socialization. Assimilation concerns the ongoing behavioral and cognitive processes of integrating individuals into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1982). Assimilation is a dual-action process that consists of planned and unintentional efforts by the organization to "socialize" employees, while at the same time the organizational members attempt to modify their work roles and environment to coincide with their own

individual values, attitudes, and needs. Jablin (1987) suggests that organizational roles are negotiated and socially constructed by actively and reactively communicating role expectations by both the organization and its members. Newcomers typically enact this negotiation through information-seeking tactics.

Organizational culture also informs how newcomers are assimilated in virtual teams. Socialization is one of the most important processes by which organizations communicate their culture (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2004). While each member entering the organization learns the values, beliefs, and practices of the organization, they simultaneously shape the organization through their "reading" of those values. Because the spirit of virtual teams focuses on innovation, change, dynamic structure, and participant diversity, we should expect newcomers to be able to do more to shape the culture of their virtual team with their own values, beliefs, and practices than in the traditional team structure.

Organizational encounter as a phase of socialization is a time for newcomers to learn behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with their jobs and organizations (Schein, 1988). By entering a new situation, newcomers want to clarify their situational identity through their work roles (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Feldman, 1976), or through securing approval of others (Graen & Ginsburgh, 1977; Katz, 1978; Wanous, 1980). To reduce uncertainty, newcomers often search for information that allows them to adjust by defining the expectations of others and orienting their behavior to the behavior of others.

The speed that virtual teams form demands that workers deal with change rapidly. Although research on teamwork suggests that teams function optimally after they have worked together for a period of time, virtual teams may not have the luxury of establishing working relationships over an extended period of time (e.g., Furst, Blackburn, & Rosen, 1999; Mark, 2001). Hence, it is vital for newcomers to quickly establish and develop relationships with others in the work setting, especially with peers and supervisors (Jablin, 2001).

Among other things, organizational relationships provide newcomers with support that facilitates the learning process and reduces stress and uncertainty associated with adjusting to a new work environment (Jablin, 2001). Much of the research on relationship development in the organizational encounter stage focuses on information seeking and information giving (e.g., Boyd & Taylor, 1998), learning behaviors and attitudes through exchange activities (e.g., Comer, 1991), technical or social information (Comer, 1991; Morrison, 1995), and regulative and normative information (e.g., Galvin & Ahuja, 2001). Evidence suggests that formal and informal socialization practices may affect the level of organizational commitment (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Buchanan, 1974), longevity in the organization (Katz, 1978; Wanous, 1980), and satisfaction and feelings of personal worth (Feld-

man, 1976). In fact, Gibson and Gibbs (2005) propose that a supportive communication climate, defined as an atmosphere that encourages open, constructive, and honest and effective interaction (p .4), often enables innovation.

The next section examines the three central areas of relationship building in virtual teams: peer relationships, supervisory relationships, and mentoring relationships.

Peer Relationships

Working with others on a team may be problematic. Several questions arise when working with others in this context. Do individuals meet the expectations the team has of them? Are they easy to get along with? Are they competent? Peers help newcomers integrate disjointed pieces of information (Van Maanen, 1984) and communicate subtle values and norms that may not be explicitly expressed by their supervisors. Newcomers have more contact with coworkers, and as a consequence, more opportunities to share information with them and develop relationships (Jablin, 2001; Comer, 1991; Teboul, 1994). Sias and Cahill (1998) proposed a variety of contextual factors, including shared tasks and group cohesion (e.g., Fine, 1986), physical proximity (e.g., Griffin & Sparks, 1990), lack of supervisor consideration (Odden & Sias, 1997), and life events outside the workplace, as well as individual factors, such as perceived similarity in attitudes and beliefs as well as demographic similarity (Adkins, Ravlin, & Meglino, 1996; Duck, 1994; Glaman, Jones, & Rozelle, 1996; Kirchmeyer, 1995), that may affect the development of relationships with peers.

Trust is a key factor in developing close relationships. However, due to the lack of physical proximity and the reliance on communication technologies, our understanding of trust in virtual teams is different from the trust in traditional teams. Piccoli and Ives (2003) define team trust as the belief that an individual or group makes good-faith efforts to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit and implicit. Cummings and Bromley (1996) further define trust as honesty in whatever negotiations preceded the commitment as well as not taking excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available (Cummings and Bromley, 1996). Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) coined the term "swift trust" to describe how virtual teams develop a different type of trust than in traditional teams. Due to the highly interdependent nature of task orientation of the team, newcomers develop trust more quickly. Team members are able to develop trust in the relationships on the basis of shared tasks rather than on the basis of similar demographics and/or physical proximity found in traditional teams (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

However, swift trust is not enough to develop close peer relationships. Team members face a number of challenges including: technological mistrust by both newcomers and established members, intuitive fear of the misuse of archived

Related Content

Requirements Prioritization Techniques

Nadina Martinez Carodand Alejandra Cechich (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Second Edition (pp. 3283-3291).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/requirements-prioritization-techniques/14061

Virtual Tutoring: The Case of TutorVista

Beena Georgeand Charlene Dykman (2009). *Journal of Cases on Information Technology (pp. 45-61).*

www.irma-international.org/article/virtual-tutoring-case-tutorvista/4119

Integration of Knowledge Resources in R&D Organizations: A Human Resource Management Perspective

Valentina Janevand Sanja Vraneš (2009). *Journal of Information Technology Research (pp. 35-48).*

www.irma-international.org/article/integration-knowledge-resources-organizations/4141

Police Operational Planning and Crime Detection through Adopting an Information Systems Approach

Peter Kinloch, Hulya Francis, Michael Francisand Mark Taylor (2009). *Journal of Information Technology Research (pp. 1-16).*

www.irma-international.org/article/police-operational-planning-crime-detection/37406

Pervasive Wireless Sensor Networks

David Marsh, Song Shen, Gregory O'Hareand Michael O'Grady (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Second Edition (pp. 3080-3085).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/pervasive-wireless-sensor-networks/14029