

Chapter 5

The World is your Office: Being Creative in a Global Virtual Organization

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing adoption of global virtual teams in industry, and their implications for traditional management practices, creativity within this context has been under-researched, with most studies focusing on students partaking in contrived virtual team projects in educational environments. This chapter focuses on a global virtual organization, Omega (a pseudonym), with the aim of exploring creativity in an organizational virtual team context. Using a qualitative case study approach in a single organization, the study makes the following contributions: (a) it identifies the personal values that motivate creativity; and (b) it explains how individuals, technology, task and organization influence creativity, drawing on the participants' perceptions. Discussed also in the chapter are implications for practice and future research.

INTRODUCTION

*Global virtual teams (GVTs) have become commonplace in most industries, while few teams operate completely face-to-face (F2F) (Dixon & Panteli, 2010). The literature agrees that GVTs have emerged as a response to pressures of globalization (e.g. Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Berry, 2011; Cascio, 2000; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000; Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010) and offers useful accounts around their implications for management (e.g. Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Gurău, 2011; Berry, 2011; Brake, 2006; Kayworth & Leidner, 2000; Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp, & Gilson, 2012). However, *creativity*—a significant and topical issue (Andriopoulos & Dawson, 2009; Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015)—has been under-researched within the context of GVTs. In fact, there are only a handful of studies that have looked into creativity in GVTs, which we review in detail later (Chamakiotis, Dekoninck, & Panteli, 2013; Chang, 2011; Letaief, Favier, & Coat, 2006; Martins & Shalley, 2011; Nemiro, 2007; Ocker, 2005). However, they carry important*

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limitations. For example, none of them have looked into creativity within an organizational context, as most have taken the case of students within university settings. This chapter aims to improve understanding of creativity within a global virtual organizational context, which the extant literature has neglected, in order to both bridge a theoretical gap and also to inform the practitioner community.

In view of the above, an exploratory case study was conducted with a global virtual organization in the sales industry, involving observations and interviews with 15 employees who are members of intra-organizational GVTs, with the aim of advancing understanding of creativity within an organizational, virtual context. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and the ensuing data were analyzed using thematic analysis as well as the laddering technique (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The study contributes to theory by (a) identifying the personal values that motivate creativity; and (b) explaining how individuals, technology, task and organization influence creativity, drawing on the participants' perceptions. In what follows, background information on GVTs and creativity is provided drawing on relevant literature. Presented next are the research approach, methods, site and procedure, and lastly, the findings and contributions of the study, as well as its implications for practice and future research.

BACKGROUND

GVTs—also known as globally distributed or dispersed teams—are teams whose members are geo-temporally and/or organizationally dispersed and interactions largely computer-mediated (e.g. Lipnack & Stamps, 2000; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). They are mostly known for their unprecedented benefits, such as their ability to transcend the boundaries of the traditional organization and capitalize on flexible team compositions, cross-cultural collaboration, and time differences (Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009). However, there is also an acknowledgement that not all GVTs are the same. They vary in terms of: purpose (Tong, Yang, & Teo, 2013); degree of geographical dispersion and continuity (Panteli, 2004); degree of virtuality (Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003); and level of synchronicity (DeLuca & Valacich, 2006); among others. What is more, scholars posit a number of challenges encountered by GVT members, including their ability to develop trust (Bierly III, Stark, & Kessler, 2009; Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Nandhakumar & Baskerville, 2006), exercise leadership pertinently (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000; Carte, Chidambaram, & Becker, 2006; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Chamakiotis & Panteli, 2010), and resolve conflict at a distance (Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2011). These studies show that the unique characteristics of virtuality, such as geo-temporal dispersion, technology mediation, and the heterogeneity characterizing them, require different management practices to the ones found in the traditional literature on collocated teams. For instance, it has been argued that a different type of leadership may be more suitable in the virtual organizational environment (Avolio et al., 2000).

Creativity has been recognized as an important issue within GVTs (Gilson et al., 2015), and some scholars have begun to explain what are the factors influencing creativity in the virtual environment. For example, Ocker (2005) identifies a set of enhancers of (e.g. stimulating members, collaborative climate) and inhibitors to (e.g. dominance, technical problems) creativity. In a recent study, Chamakiotis et al. (2013) unpacked a number of individual, team, and technology-related factors influencing creativity in their study of a GVT project in the engineering domain. They found, for example, that subgroups, i.e. collocated individuals within GVTs, may have to play both an enhancing and an inhibiting role in different situations. Building on media richness theory, which argues that the more synchronous (real-time) a communication medium is, the richer the level of information (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008),

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