

International Virtual Offices

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INTRODUCTION

Communication technologies are continually expanding our ideas of the office into cyberspace environments. One result of this expansion is the international virtual office (IVO), a setting in which individuals located in different nations use online media to work together on the same project. Different cultural communication expectations, however, can affect the success with which IVO participants exchange information. This article examines three cultural factors that can affect communication within IVO environments.

BACKGROUND

Virtual workplaces offer organizations a variety of benefits, including:

- Increased flexibility and quicker responsiveness (Jordan, 2004)
- Better organizational information sharing (Ruppel & Harrington, 2001)
- Reduced absenteeism (Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001)
- Greater efficiency (Jordan, 2004; Salkever, 2003)
- Improved brainstorming practices (Salkever, 2003)

It is perhaps for these reasons that organizations are increasingly using such distributed methods of production (Supporting a Growing, 2004; Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). The online nature of these workplaces means that they allow for individuals in different nations to participate in certain processes.

This openness is occurring at a time when more of the world is rapidly gaining online access. Taiwan, for example, has the world's fourth highest rate of broadband penetration, while 70% of South Korea and 50% of Hong Kong have broadband access (Global Perspectives, 2004; Taiwan's Broadband, 2004). Such

international access, moreover, is expected to grow markedly in the near future. Indian Internet access, for example, is projected to grow by as much as 11 fold in the next four years (Pastore, 2004), and the number of wireless local area networks (WLANs) in China is expected to increase 33% by 2008 (Wireless Networks, 2004). This increased global access brings with it quick and easy connections to relatively inexpensive yet highly skilled technical workforces in other nations (The New Geography, 2003; Weir, 2004). For these reasons, an increasing number of organizations is now examining different ways to use IVOs to tap this international labor force and lower overall production costs (The New Geography, 2003).

To make effective use of such IVO situations, organizations need to understand how cultural factors could affect information exchange among international employees. The problem has to do with differences in cultural communication assumptions. That is, cultural groups can have differing expectations of what constitutes an appropriate or effective method for exchanging information, and these variations even can occur between individuals from the same linguistic background (Driskill, 1996; Weiss, 1998). For example, individuals from different cultures might use alternate strategies for proving an argument (Hofstede, 1997; Weiss, 1998), or cultural groups could have varying expectations of how sentence length (Ulijn & Strother, 1995) or word use (Li & Koole, 1998) contributes to the credibility or intent of a message. These differing expectations, moreover, transcend linguistic boundaries and can affect how individuals interact in a common language (Ulijn, 1996).

While relatively little has been written on how cultural factors could affect IVOs, some research indicates that differing cultural communication expectations can lead to miscommunication or misperception in online exchanges (Artemeva, 1998; Ma, 1996). It is these basic communication issues that organizations must address before they can begin to

explore the knowledge management potential that IVOs have to offer. To avoid such problems, employees need to understand how cultural factors could affect online exchanges. They also need to develop strategies to address cultural factors affecting IVO exchanges.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Three key areas related to successful communication in IVOs are making contact, status and communication expectations, and the use of a common language. When addressed early and effectively in an IVO, these factors can create the environment essential for effective information exchanges.

Area 1: Making Contact

Successful international online interactions are based on one primary factor—contact. Contact is essential to exchanging information and materials among parties. Making contact requires all parties involved to have similar understandings of how and when exchanges should take place. Yet cultures can have varying expectations of how and when contact should be made. For example, cultural groups can have different expectations of the importance or the exigency associated with a particular medium, a factor that could influence how quickly or how effectively different IVO participants can perform their tasks. Many Americans, for example, believe that an e-mail message merits a quick and timely response. In Ukrainian culture, however, face-to-face communication tends to be valued over other forms of interaction, especially in a business setting (Richmond, 1995). Thus, e-mail to Ukrainian co-workers might not provide as rapid a response as American counterparts might like or require, a factor that could lead to unforeseen delays in an overall process (Mikelonis, 1999). The effects of this delay could be compounded, if others need to wait for this Ukrainian counterpart to complete his or her task before they can begin their own work.

Another factor is the time at which contact can be made. Many Americans, for example, expect to be able to contact co-workers or clients between the hours of 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. during the standard work week. In France, however, many individuals

expect an office to shut down for two or more hours in the middle of the day for the traditional lunch period (generally from noon to 2:00 P.M. or from 1:00 P.M. to 3:00 P.M.) (Weiss, 1998). Such a discrepancy could lead to an unexpected delay in contacting an IVO colleague and in getting essential information quickly.

Similarly, most Americans think of vacations as two- or three- week periods during which someone is in the office to answer the phones. In France, however, it is not uncommon for businesses to close for four to six weeks during the summer, while all of the employees are away on vacation (Weiss, 1998). In these cases, no one may be available to respond to e-mails, receive online materials, or transmit or post needed information.

Additionally, the meaning individuals associate with certain terms can affect information exchanges in IVOs. That is, words such as today, yesterday, and tomorrow can have different meanings, depending on whether they are based on the context of the sender or the recipient of a message. If, for example, a worker in the United States tells a Japanese colleague that he or she needs a report by tomorrow, does the sender mean tomorrow according to the sender's time (in which case, it could be today in Japan), or does the sender mean tomorrow according to Japanese time (in which case, it could be two days from the time at which the message was sent)?

To avoid such contact-related problems, individuals working in IVOs can adopt a series of strategies for interacting with international colleagues:

- **Agree upon the medium that will serve as the primary mechanism for exchanging information and establish expectations for when responses to urgent messages can be sent.** Individuals need to agree upon the best means and medium of contacting others when a quick response is essential and then set guidelines for when one can expect an international colleague to check his or her messages and when/how quickly a response can be sent, based on factors of culture and time difference.
- **Establish a secondary medium for making contact, should the primary medium fail.** Certain circumstances could render a medium inoperative. For this reason, individuals should establish a backup method for contacting over-

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