

# Chapter XXXI

## A Proposition for Developing Trust and Relational Synergy in International e-Collaborative Groups

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### ABSTRACT

*Trust and relational development represents a critical challenge in online collaboration groups. Often the problem is attributed to several factors including physical distances, time differences, cultures, and other contributing factors. The challenge in virtual teams centers on creating a successful cohort that functions as a team and develops a sense of trust and cohesion in the process of accomplishing respective group goals. However, the lack of trust in online groups hinders relational development. The author contends that while online collaboration can be clouded by problems with trust and relational synergy as a whole, the problem is exacerbated in international online or e-Collaborative groups. The development of trust is essential to relational synergy and warmth that fosters successful task and social goal accomplishment. After reviewing related and extant research in online communication, the author offers some practical suggestions for facilitating and sustaining trust and relational synergy in international online collaboration with information communication technologies (ICTs).*

### INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) mediums such as e-mail and distribution lists are major ways in which business is being conducted in modern organizations (Craig, 2001-2002; Finholt

& Sproull, 1990; Yu, 2001). Text-based CMC via e-mail, list servers, newsgroups (asynchronous), and chat rooms (synchronous) provide ways for individuals to be connected to other individuals and groups, and to obtain information or help that would have been difficult or impossible to

obtain otherwise. The dawn of the new millennium has seen increasing globalization wherein organizational communication and group interaction occurs through information communication technologies. Perhaps not surprising, estimates from Gartner Inc. suggest that the amount of time a particular employee will spend with others in different geographical location will increase by 40 percent before 2010 (Solomon, 2001).

## **BACKGROUND**

At the same time, communication technology media are not without their criticism. For instance, online collaboration consists of meetings and interactions that exist through virtual space—that is, where participants interact, using communication technology media. A major criticism of online collaboration medium is the lack of nonverbal cues during interaction. The lack of nonverbal cues is believed to render the technology ineffective especially when compared with a face-to-face medium (Garton & Wellman, 1995; Olaniran, 2007a). While there is other communication technology (i.e., videoconferencing) that offers nonverbal cues via audio and video cues in virtual team collaboration, for the most part, virtual teams operate asynchronously to accommodate different time zones and to foster round the clock organizational applied resources and productivity. As organizations embark on online team collaboration and projects, they find themselves at a crossroad where accomplishing task goals are just as important as achieving relational goals in any given projects. Thus, organizations are challenged to attend to and balance both set of goals if they are to be effective. In an overview of extant literature that reveals findings from original research to explore strategies that users can develop or adapt to overcome the lack of nonverbal cues in the CMC media technology, the intent of this discussion is to improve the potential of virtual communication for constructing relationships. Specifically, the

focus is on adapting communication technology media to develop trust and relational synergy in international online collaboration groups.

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

International online collaboration (e-Collaborative) teams represent a way for including employees in organizational participation and decision making processes (Olaniran, 2007a). Although one study showed that employee participation is correlated with commitment and that committed employees are more likely to be intrinsically fulfilled and have positive relational synergy with other employees (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), one must be aware that commitment to an organization as a whole and commitment to work teams are different ideas (Becker & Billings, 1993; Morrow, 1993).

From most organizational standpoints, the impetus to use virtual teams for group collaboration is often economically driven (i.e., cost cutting, speed, and efficiency); however, there are some key challenges that often hinder success. Challenges in e-Collaborative teams include misunderstandings and conflicts through fragmented communication and difficulties maintaining relational ties among group members. Armstrong and Cole (2002) found that while geographically dispersed groups become integrated over time, they nonetheless experience problems associated with proximity (see also, Crampton, 2002; Olaniran, 1996a; 2001a; Solomon, 2001). Armstrong and Cole (2002) found that national cultures and distances, in general, experience problems that extend beyond miles and time zones even in integrated groups. Thus, they argued that organizational problems sometimes are recreated and reinforced within distributed groups. Similarly, Crampton (2002) contends that working from dispersed locations reduces the situational, and more importantly, the personal information, that collaborators have about one another. Consequently, the lack of this

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