

Chapter XXIX

Using Virtual Worlds to Assist Distributed Teams

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ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games are becoming a useful tool for distributed teams. From providing a common working place, to allowing members of the team to interact in a physical albeit virtual form, virtual worlds are setting a new standard for tools to facilitate interactions between members of distributed teams. This chapter explores the ways in which virtual worlds could support interactive teams at a greater fidelity than that of the previous generation of groupware tools using a popular virtual world, Second Life as an example. While providing specific examples of how Second Life's current and planned feature sets could already support distributed teams, that is, teams whose members are geographically disbursed. New features that would provide additional support for these types of teams are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Due to advances in communications technology over the past 30 years, the use of distributed or virtual teams is becoming more common in the modern workplace. We use the terms “distributed” and “virtual” teams interchangeably to refer to groups of employees who must accomplish their tasks by working with teammates who are

physically dispersed. Such teams must rely on a variety of communication technologies to mediate their interactions and enable coordinated effort to occur. Despite the growing importance of virtual teams in the workplace, the mediating technologies that typically support them have been little more than simple modifications of “off-the-shelf” software developed to support individual tasks, such as e-mail and calendar

programs. These technologies are not optimized to support true team performance, and often do not respond to the many challenges confronted by distributed teams. However, the emerging field of Virtual Worlds is providing new tools that may support many of the requirements of distributed teams that other technologies do not. To aid this discussion, we will use a Virtual World program called Second Life, developed by Linden Lab, as an example of how virtual world technology can support distributed team performance.

BACKGROUND: A BRIEF BREAKDOWN OF CORE TEAM MECHANICS

Before describing how Virtual Worlds might better support distributed teams, it is important to first discuss the nature of distributed team performance, and the factors that may facilitate or hinder it. Team researchers have identified a number of crucial team processes at the behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive levels that are believed to be important determinants of effective team performance (see Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 1999). In distributed teams, which must rely on computer-mediated communication channels, these processes must necessarily be modified since the set of cues available to team members is different than in face-to-face teams. In fact, given the nature of distributed teams and the additional coordination demands placed upon team members in such situations, it is not surprising that they are believed to be at even higher risk for coordination breakdowns (Fiore, Salas, & Bowers, 2001). In large part, these coordination decrements can be attributed to the necessary reliance on technology that is incumbent in distributed team performance. Fiore, Salas, Cuevas, and Bowers (2003) have used the phrase “team opacity” to describe the manner in which technology-mediated coordination obscures important team processes such as team mental model development.

The following sections provide an overview of the processes that team researchers have identified as crucial to team effectiveness and the manner in which physical dispersion affects them. We organize these into behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive processes in keeping with prevailing theories of team performance. Following this, we describe how Virtual World technologies can be used to overcome some of the challenges typically associated with distributed team performance.

BEHAVIORAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISTRIBUTED AND COLLOCATED TEAMS

As noted, the literature in team performance delineates several important behavioral processes that underlie effective team performance, and the potential impact of team opacity is evident in several of them. Powell, Piccoli, and Ives (2004) summarized a number of these effects; we have selected the most salient for this discussion. These include: communication, coordination, adaptability, and leadership. They are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Communication

The most obvious team process affected by physical dispersion is communication. Differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication have been widely reported. See Bannan-Ritlan (2002) for a review. Given these differences, it is not surprising that distributed teams are subject to disruptions in their ability to accomplish tasks. These disruptions are even more troublesome when teams are composed of a mixture of colocated members and distant ones. In these cases, issues of mistrust frequently arise because it is assumed that the colocated members are having conversations to which the distant members cannot avail themselves (Crampton, 2001).

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