



## **Chapter 3**

# **Am I Doing What's Expected? New Member Socialization in Virtual Groups**

John E. Galvin

Indiana University - Indianapolis, USA

Manju K. Ahuja

Florida State University, USA

## **INTRODUCTION**

The small miracle of telecommunications that Alexander Graham Bell brought to society in 1876 continues to transform our lives today. A technology that business was reluctant to embrace in the 1880s has now been embedded in the very fabric of organization life to such an extent that to exclude it is next to impossible. Today, communication technology allows people to work together even when they are physically far apart. In its most extreme use, businesses can operate without the employees ever meeting each other or their customers, thus creating a “virtual workplace” where time, space, and structure become tools for the individual rather than constraints of the organization.

A recent editorial page cartoon depicted a family of four relaxing at the beach while each of them was connected to another activity through telecommunications —faxing, checking e-mail, participating in an on-line conference and arranging travel schedules. Does this picture represent a positive or

negative image of working in a virtual setting? Has the use of modern communication technology released us from the bounds of office walls and domineering organization hierarchies? Or, has it made us more dependent on our coworkers in order to perform our own work effectively, in addition to making us unable to have any time away from work? Has it made us more isolated or more connected? Positive advances are often accompanied by unexpected side effects that were not thoroughly considered or even anticipated by their proponents. For instance, individuals who work in a virtual workplace may have less visibility to their managers, co-workers, and peers. This might lead to feelings of greater isolation from the organization, lower levels of social interaction, a decreased sense of shared culture, and a greater dependence on technology rather than developing their own individual skills.

Consider the problems facing individuals working in a virtual workplace where there is a mix of new and experienced workers who are dependent on each other for the overall performance of the group. While some type of information that would be relevant to members of a co-located group is rendered irrelevant in a virtual setting, other types of information can be relevant to both co-located and virtual groups. For example, the local style and code of dress has little meaning to virtual group members since they are in different locations. However, these same individuals still need to understand and adhere to group deadlines, preferred task practices, and other group norms. In general, over time, experienced workers have developed an understanding of the needs, skills, practices, tools, processes, and informal structures that characterize the operational “equilibrium” of the team. When a new member is added, it disrupts the equilibrium of the group, until the new member is integrated into the team. The experienced members need to share their knowledge with the new member just as the newcomer has to learn what the expectations of the group are in order to perform effectively. Without access to co-located team members to help make sense of their work environment — including the task environment as well as the social environment — can technology adequately facilitate the socialization of newcomers into a virtual workplace? If so, what are the mechanisms that might make it easier for newcomers to become effective potential contributors? These are the questions we seek to address in this chapter.

## **THE VIRTUAL WORKPLACE AND SOCIALIZATION**

A virtual group is a “group of people who collaborate closely even though they are separated by space, time, and organizational barriers”

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