



Chapter IV

The Role of Shared Cognition and CSCW in Strategic Alliances

Michael A. Rosen, University of Central Florida, USA

Brooke C. Kelly, University of Central Florida, USA

Eduardo Salas, University of Central Florida, USA

Abstract

Information asymmetry is omnipresent within strategic alliances. This diversity in knowledge structure and content between team members comprising the alliance is complicated by the increasing trend of physical distribution of team members in international strategic alliances. While technical solutions to distance work abound, a strong and theoretically grounded approach to how best to implement these solutions is lacking. However, research in the area of shared cognition holds promise as an appropriate solution. This chapter presents a three-part framework for organizing research in the areas of shared cognition and CSCW (Computer Supported Collaborative Work) so that strategic alliance managers will have a resource for implementing their technologically mediated teams.

Introduction

Consider, if you will, an international strategic alliance based on a composite of several case study investigations. This hypothetical alliance, comprised of two manufacturing corporations, one U.S.-based and one based in France, each engaging in cooperation as a means to gain access to the other organization's market-specific information and thereby open new markets for its own products. Within this alliance, a globally distributed team (comprising members from the Chicago and San Francisco offices of the U.S. firm as well as members from the Paris and Toulouse offices of the French firm) was tasked with developing a marketing strategy for the U.S. firm's product line in France.

To begin their work, the team manager scheduled a videoconference between the four offices so that the team could ensure that everyone was on the same page as far as tasking and responsibilities. The meeting went well as a general introduction between the teams and produced a rough course of action. However, several weeks later, the team scheduled a second videoconference to work on some specific details of the marketing plan; this time, the meeting was unproductive. The setup of the videoconference made it difficult for team members to establish an orderly discussion. Team members from various locations would speak over other members and the discussion was difficult for many to follow. The videoconference ended with no progress being made. Initially, the team manager was stunned at the general failure of the second videoconference, but in retrospect he realized that the nature of the videoconference format did not afford the type of communication necessary to deliberate points of a specific plan. In a second effort to accomplish the original goal of a well defined plan of action, the team manager decided to use a threaded discussion board on the team's Web site so that team members could post ideas relevant to particular aspects of the plan and respond to other's ideas in an orderly and deliberative manner. The change of collaboration mode yielded returns in a rapid movement toward completion of the goal of the team and, subsequently, of the alliance.

Scenarios such as this are increasingly commonplace. Rapid growth in the amount of inter-organizational collaboration has been a consistent trend in the knowledge-based economy. Organizations continue to focus on and grow their core expertise, choosing to leverage that expertise with other specialized organizations in the form of strategic alliances. This paradigm maximizes the efficiency by which knowledge is brought to bear on the marketplace. However, the process of inter-organizational knowledge access is impeded by asymmetry in knowledge structure and content between team members constituting the alliance. A central benefit of the strategic alliance—access to expertise—is also

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