Chapter 6.2
Managing Relationships in Virtual Team Socialization

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional organizational workplace is dramatically changing. An increasing number of organizations are employing workers who are physically and geographically dispersed and electronically dependent on each other to accomplish work (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003). Recent technological advances, combined with more flexible job design, have helped increase the number of people working in distributed environments. Hence, more employees are working individually and on teams that seldom, if ever, meet face to face. These virtual employees have the same work responsibilities as traditional employees in addition to the challenge of operating within the dynamics of these newly designed mediated workplaces.

Rapid developments in communication technology and the increasing influence of globaliza-

tion and efficiency on organizations have significantly accelerated the growth and importance of virtual teams in contemporary workplaces. Virtual teams are becoming more commonplace because of the possibilities of a more efficient, less expensive, and more productive workplace. Additionally, distributed teams are less difficult to organize temporal organizational members than traditional co-located teams (Larsen & McInerney, 2002; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001; Piccoli & Ives, 2003).

Although there are apparent advantages of organizing work virtually, the challenge for new member integration lies in the fact that team members must communicate primarily through communication technology such as electronic mail, telephone, and videoconferencing or computer conferencing. This increased dependence on technology as a medium of communication significantly alters the way new members are

socialized to work teams. Additionally, team members' ability to use complex communication technologies varies across individuals. This variation potentially may lead to inter- and intra-group conflict, as well as creating organizational work ambiguity, which refers to the existence of conflicting and multiple interpretations of a work issue (Miller, 2006). This article addresses the challenges of virtual team socialization with regard to newcomer assimilation and how newcomer encounter is an embedded process of virtual team assimilation.

BACKGROUND

Effective communication is central to organizational and team socialization. The way individuals are socialized in a team may determine his or her success within the team and the successful achievement of organizational and team goals. Team socialization and the communication practices associated with newcomer integration have been researched extensively (e.g., Brockmann, & Anthony, 2002; Lagerstrom & Anderson, 2003) since Jablin (1982) first explored this multilayered process. Socialization occurs when a newcomer of a team acquires the knowledge, behavior, and attitudes needed to participate fully as a member of that team. Jablin (1987) framed the stages of socialization as anticipatory socialization, organizational assimilation (encounter and metamorphosis), and organizational exit. Although there is an abundance of literature on traditional organizational socialization, research on virtual team socialization is beginning to emerge (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Picherit-Duthler, Long, & Kohut, 2004; Long, Kohut, & Picherit-Duthler, 2004).

NEWCOMER ASSIMILATION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Organizational assimilation is perhaps the most important, yet complicated, stage of virtual team socialization. Assimilation concerns the ongoing behavioral and cognitive processes of integrating individuals into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1982). Assimilation is a dual-action process that consists of planned and unintentional efforts by the organization to "socialize" employees, while at the same time the organizational members attempt to modify their work roles and environment to coincide with their own individual values, attitudes, and needs. Jablin (1987) suggests that organizational roles are negotiated and socially constructed by actively and reactively communicating role expectations by both the organization and its members. Newcomers typically enact this negotiation through information-seeking tactics.

Organizational culture also informs how newcomers are assimilated in virtual teams. Socialization is one of the most important processes by which organizations communicate their culture (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2004). While each member entering the organization learns the values, beliefs, and practices of the organization, they simultaneously shape the organization through their "reading" of those values. Because the spirit of virtual teams focuses on innovation, change, dynamic structure, and participant diversity, we should expect newcomers to be able to do more to shape the culture of their virtual team with their own values, beliefs, and practices than in the traditional team structure.

Organizational encounter as a phase of socialization is a time for newcomers to learn behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with their jobs and organizations (Schein, 1988). By entering a new situation, newcomers want to clarify their situational identity through their work roles (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Feldman, 1976), or through securing approval of others (Graen & Ginsburgh, 1977; Katz, 1978; Wanous, 1980). To reduce uncertainty, newcomers often search for information that allows them to adjust by defining the expectations of others and orienting their behavior to the behavior of others.

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