Chapter 14

Mapping a Typology for Identifying the Culturally–Related Challenges of Global Virtual Teams:
A Research Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents and synthesizes the culturally oriented challenges of managing distributed projects by Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) and examines the distinctive issues intrinsic to GVT work structures from a research perspective. In the first section, the authors define the concept of the global virtual team and explore the differences between global virtual teams and traditional co-located team structures. In the second section, they draw upon the cross-cultural theories (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1984) as a framework to explore the unique aspects of managing GVTs and then further develop a cultural typology illustrating the challenges of GVTs. Next, the authors discuss the research approaches to examine the cultural impacts on the success of GVTs, as well as highlight the practical implication in the light of the wide-ranging training programs needed by multinational corporations. In the final section, they assert that in order to be effective, GVTs need to develop new patterns of communication, team structure, knowledge exchange, and project management capabilities, and thus, the authors conclude with the future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of increased globalization and complex work integration, Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) have become widely accepted innovative work structures that transcend boundaries of time and space. Such structure brings together diverse professionals to collaborate through computer-mediated communication technologies. While the usage of the GVTs has risen exponentially over the last decade, its success as an effective organizational tool depends, in part, on *why* it is formed – its mandate and mission and *how* it is formed, managed and integrated into the organization. GVTs individually and as a group, cope with very different challenges than do traditional team structures and their work environments, communication strategies, and collaborative arrangements pose unique opportunities and challenges (Lee-Kelley & Sankey, 2008). As virtual teams engage in their collaborative efforts, they often face challenges arising from team members' divergent cultural differences, mental maps, leadership views, and technologies. To be successful, GVTs need an external environment that is conducive to its existence, namely, adequate organizational, managerial, and technological support. Managers need to understand the cultural and social complexities of such teams and provide the socio-technical infrastructure, intercultural training, and support in order to facilitate team efficacy and success. Concurrently, teams also need a conducive internal environment which promotes trust and intra-team member support while members actively engage in new patterns of communication, collaboration, knowledge, and social exchange and social loafing in a computer-mediated environment (Alnuaim, Robert, & Maruping, 2010; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004; Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Sarker, Sarker, & Jana, 2010).

This chapter presents the challenges of managing distributed projects by GVTs and examines the distinctive issues intrinsic to GVT work structures.

In the first section, we define the concept of the global virtual team; note the growing phenomenon of GVTs and their managerial implications. We also explore the difference between GVTs and traditional co-located team structures. In the second section, we discuss the use of cross-cultural theories as the basis to explore cultural-attuned challenges that inherently faced by GVTs in multinational corporations. Next, we develop a cultural typology to explore the complex management aspects of using GVTs as well as the unique challenges of synchronizing elements such as distance, time, and culture. In the fourth section, the implications of using GVTs for distributed projects are discussed in light of research propositions on how to examine cultural issues related to GVTs and practical implications in respect to the wide-ranging training programs needed for multinational corporations. In the conclusion, we provide a summary and future research directions by addressing the culturally-attuned challenges of managing GVTs. We postulate that in order to be effective, GVTs need to develop new patterns of communication, cohesive team structure, enhanced knowledge exchange, and supportive organizational culture with compatible and supportive leadership. Multinational corporations must understand the cultural and social complexities of such teams and understand the factors that contribute or detract from team efficacy. In addition, they need to provide the socio-technical infrastructure, intercultural training, and support needed to facilitate team success.

Defining Global Virtual Teams and Collocated Teams

We define a global team as a distinct entity that is organizationally dispersed and whose members come from different geographical locations, do not necessarily have a common cultural or linguistic background, and collaborate using asynchronous and synchronous ICT technologies. When considering GVTs, one must recognize that such teams

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