

Newcomer Assimilation in Virtual Team Socialization

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INTRODUCTION

The way we work today is being transformed. Recent technological advances, combined with more flexible job design, have helped increase the number of people working in geographically and/or temporally dispersed environments. Increasing numbers of organizations have employees who are not physically present in the traditional organizations. Hence, more employees are working on teams that seldom, if ever, meet face-to-face. These “teleworkers” have the same work responsibilities as traditional employees, but they have the added challenges of managing or operating within the dynamics of these virtual teams.

Rapid developments in communication technology and the increased globalization of organizations have also greatly accelerated the growth and importance of virtual teams in the workplace. Virtual teams are becoming more commonplace because they are more efficient, less expensive, and less difficult to organize than traditional co-located teams (Larsen & McInerney, 2002; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001; Piccoli & Ives, 2003). Although there are apparent advantages to organizing work virtually, the challenge for new member integration lies in the fact that team members communicate primarily via electronic mail, telephone, and videoconferencing or computer conferencing. This increased dependence on mediated communication significantly alters the traditional way new members are socialized to work teams. This article addresses the challenges of virtual team socialization with regard to newcomer assimilation. Particular attention is given to newcomer encounter as embedded processes of virtual team assimilation.

Effective communication is key to organizational and team socialization. How well an individual is socialized into a team may determine his or her success within the team, as well as the success of the team in achieving its goals and objectives. Team socialization and the commu-

nication practices associated with newcomer integration have been researched extensively (e.g., Brockmann & Anthony, 2002; Lagerstrom & Anderson, 2003) since Jablin (1982) first explored the multi-layered process. Socialization occurs when a newcomer to 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 (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004; Picherit-Duthler, Long & Kohut, 2004; Ahuja & Galvin, 2003).

BACKGROUND

Organizational assimilation is perhaps the most important stage of virtual team socialization. Such assimilation concerns the process by which individuals become integrated into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1982). This stage consists of planned and unintentional efforts by the organization to “socialize” employees, and the attempts of organizational members to modify their roles and work environment to better fit their values, attitudes, and needs. As Jablin (1987) noted through the proactive and reactive communication of expectations, organizational roles are negotiated and socially created.

Organizational encounter is a time for newcomers to learn behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with their jobs and organizations (Schein, 1988). As a result of 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 search for information that allows them to adjust by defining the expect-

tations of others and orienting their behavior to the behavior of others.

The speed that virtual teams form demands that workers deal with rapid change. Although research on teamwork suggests that teams function optimally after they have worked together, virtual teams may not have the luxury of establishing working relationships over an extended period of time (e.g., Furst, Blackburn & Rosen, 1999; Mark, 2001). Thus, it is vital for newcomers to quickly establish and develop relationships with others in the work setting, especially with peers and supervisors (Jablin, 2001).

Among other things, organizational relationships provide newcomers with support that facilitates the learning process, and reduces stress and uncertainty associated with adjusting to a new work environment (Jablin, 2001). Much of the research on relationship development in the organizational encounter stage focuses on information seeking and information giving (e.g., Boyd & Taylor, 1998), learning behaviors and attitudes through exchange activities (e.g., Comer, 1991), technical or social information (Comer, 1991; Morrison, 1995), and regulative and normative information (e.g., Galvin & Ahuja, 2001). Evidence suggests that formal and informal socialization practices may affect the level of organizational commitment (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Buchanan, 1974), longevity in the organization (Katz, 1978; Wanous, 1980), and satisfaction and feelings of personal worth (Feldman, 1976).

The next section examines the three central areas of relationship building in virtual teams: peer relationships, supervisory relationships, and mentoring relationships.

Peer Relationships

Anyone who has worked on a team project is immediately concerned with the interactions they might have with their teammates. Do these individuals meet the expectations the team has of them? Are they easy to get along with? Are they competent? Peers help newcomers integrate what may appear to be disjointed pieces of information (Van Maanen, 1984), and may communicate subtle values and norms that may not be well understood by supervisors. Newcomers have more contact with coworkers, and as a consequence, more opportunities to share information with them and develop relationships (Jablin, 2001; Comer, 1991; Teboul, 1994). Sias and Cahill (1998) proposed a variety of contextual factors, including shared tasks and group cohesion (e.g., Fine, 1986), physical proximity (e.g., Griffin & Sparks, 1990), lack of supervisor consideration (Odden & Sias, 1997), and life events outside the workplace, as well as individual factors, such as perceived similarity in attitudes and beliefs as well as demographic similarity (Adkins, Ravlin & Meglino, 1996;

Duck, 1994; Glaman, Jones & Rozelle, 1996; Kirchmeyer, 1995), that may affect the development of relationships with peers.

Trust is a key factor in developing close relationships. However, due to the lack of physical proximity and the reliance on communication technologies, our understanding of trust in virtual teams is different from the trust in traditional teams. Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) coined the term “swift trust” to describe how virtual teams develop a different type of trust than in traditional teams. Due to the highly interdependent task orientation of the team, newcomers develop trust more quickly. Team members are able to develop trust in relationships on the basis of shared tasks rather than on the basis of similar demographics and/or physical proximity (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

However, swift trust is not enough to develop close peer relationships. Team members face numerous challenges including: technological mistrust by both newcomers and established members, intuitive fear of the misuse of archived communication (e.g., e-mail trails), and the difficulty of sharing personal or non-work-related issues. Thus, virtual newcomers may be unable or unwilling to take advantage of the informal organizational development that appears central to organizational socialization in traditional teams. This clearly inhibits the development of close peer relationships in virtual teams which in turn may inhibit constructive team cohesion. Similarly, opportunities to understand organizational politics are reduced. Unless the communication among team members is open, power alliances form, allowing certain behaviors to take place such as social loafing, domination, and the formation of cliques. Groups or individuals may be alienated by these behaviors and may differ in their responses based on location or functional role; but the outcome is the same—limited effectiveness of the team, low commitment, low loyalty, and mistrust. Other sources of information such as supervisors and mentors may prove more helpful in recognizing and adapting to political nuances.

Supervisor Relationships

Supervisors are important for assimilating newcomers to organizations by helping build a shared interpretive system that is reflective of assimilation (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Feldman, 1976; Graen, 1976; Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Schein, 1988). Supervisors frequently communicate with the newcomers, may serve as a role model, filter and interpret formal downward-directed management messages, have positional power to administer rewards and punishments, are a central source of information related to job and organizational expectations as well as feedback on task performance, and are

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