Trust Placement Process in Metateam Projects

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INTRODUCTION

Metateams are temporary confederations of dislocated teams from different firms working on a single Information Systems (IS) development project. These teams (or groups) are linked by interdependencies and commercial agreements and use information and telecommunication technologies as the main media for their communication activities. Within these socio-technical systems, teams are members of *virtual teams of teams*, where key teams belong to different firms, each performing well-defined functions in accordance with its contractual role, with the objective of executing a single overarching project.

Metateams can bring expertise from multiple firms to the project while information and communication technologies facilitate the collaboration of their teams. However, managing metateams presents unique difficulties, as achieving effective metateam collaborations is both critical and difficult. Metateams are particularly exposed to the lack of common understanding of prime objectives and deficient pre-project arrangements observed in traditional IS project teams (Jiang, Klein, & Means, 2000); identity issues of autostereotype (how groups perceive themselves) and heterostereotype (how groups perceive other groups), arising from encounters of groups exhibiting organizational or national cultural differences (Hofstede, 1997); difficulties in successfully applying "foreign" management techniques to culturally heterogeneous groups (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998); and, goal incongruence as a product of organizational fragmentation resulting from deregulation, privatization, or outsourcing (Berggren, Soderlund, & Anderson, 2001).

This overview, based on a theory-building empirical study, suggests that the effectiveness of the trust placement process—and not just exhibiting specific levels of trust— significantly impacts on project success. We focus on trusting behaviors, what we *do* when we trust or distrust others, and how our actions impact on the *quality* and *cost* of the metateam project.1

STUDY BACKGROUND: THE PROJECT AND ITS KEY PLAYERS

The SUN Project involved three key organizations – RedCorp, ITSP, and OSC – and dislocated teams from three countries (Figure 1). RedCorp was in charge of the total project. RedCorp and ITSP were linked by an information technology (IT) outsourcing agreement in which RedCorp was the client. OSC was working in partnership with ITSP on the SUN project.

SUN was a strategic multimillion-dollar IT development and implementation project. Due to its high priority, magnitude, and impact within the client company, SUN was highly visible at the top management level in all participating firms.

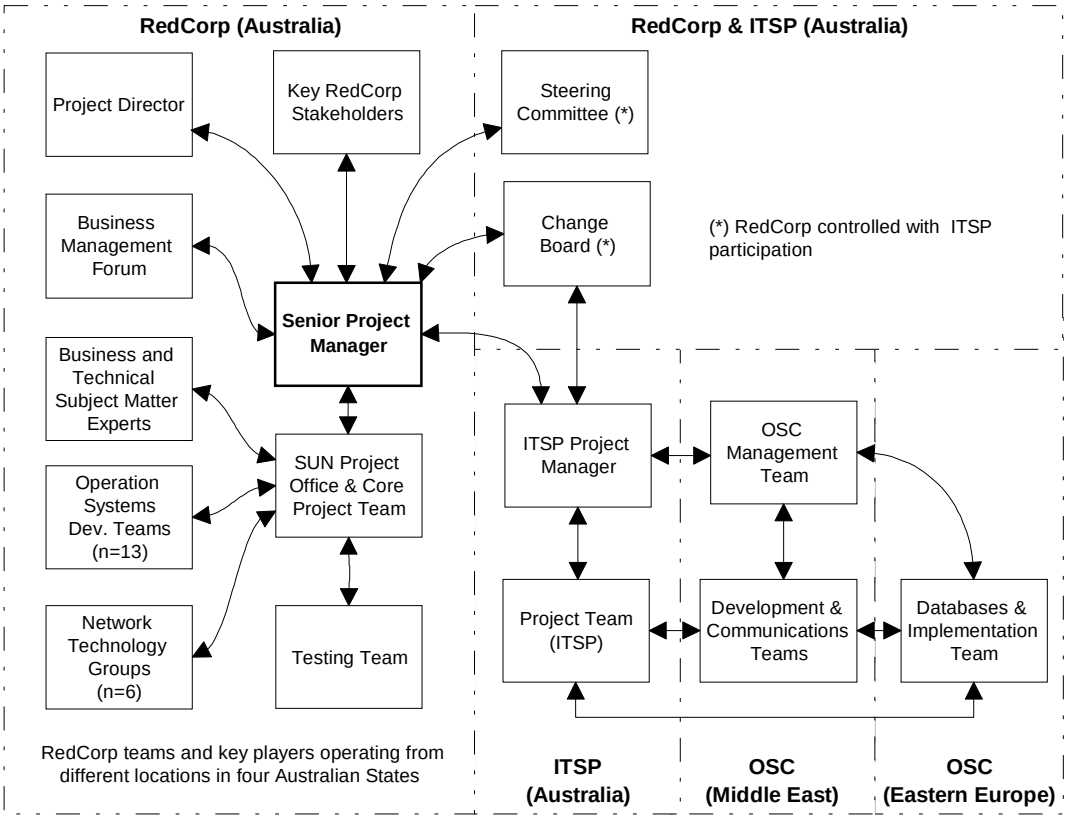
The case data included semi-structured interviews, observations, and access to project documents and electronic correspondence. The SUN Project provided rich documentary evidence; more than 4,000 e-mails and 800 project documents were available for the study. Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 Glaser, 1978, 2001) was used to develop a conceptual account while the software package ATLAS.ti facilitated text analysis and management of research memos.

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

Contextual issues are critical to understanding socio-technical organizations such as metateams; among others, the following aspects need to be briefly described:

- Metateams are organizationally fragmented systems where managers: (a) do not have the full range of options regarding project strategies and control mechanisms available to more traditional project organizations; (b) deal with teams from multiple firms having multiple mental models of what reality is or should be; and (c) may confront resentment as a consequence of anti-outsourcing sentiment.
- Metateams may be subject to unrealistic demands and expectations. Modern organizations, pushed by markets or regulators and competing in a fast-changing environment, may resort to metateams expecting to achieve the fastest project cycles and the lowest possible costs. In our study, the combination of high demands for rapid delivery and poor understanding of project complexity resulted in inadequate inter-firm agreements, which enforced rigidity when flexibility was required.
- Communication effectiveness and efficiency face multiple obstacles (e.g., miscommunication due to

Figure 1. SUN Project key players, their firms, locations, and formal communication channels.



language barriers, message distortion; dogmatic approach; remoteness, inappropriate levels of trust). Additionally, it was observed that the quality of the inter-team communication was impeded, not only because of the "virtual" nature of their communication (as it is in the case of virtual teams), but also during face-to-face events due to diverging interests, urgencies, and priorities.

- Achieving a cohesive metateam is restricted by: multiple senses of identity; the magnification of the negative aspects of eliteness; the multiplicity of meaning regarding the "team product" and ownership of products and sub-products; and the often stressful nature of forced interrelations under low levels of trust.
- Goal incongruence can create different worldviews affecting teams and actors. Incongruent needs, wants, and perceptions can potentially lead to subgoal strategies that are detrimental to successfully accomplishing the end goal. Goal incongruence is a default state of metateams, a consequence of imperfect contracting and imperfect cognition.
- While temporality is a condition of all project work, this condition is exacerbated in metateam. In traditional project teams, some level of expectation exists regarding the probability of team continuity; this probability is very low in metateams, reducing the perceived value of getting along with each and therefore adding more weight to the task-oriented, less personalized relationship.
- Although the higher level of experience required of team members is perceived as a critical asset, it also brings issues such as: allegiance to referential constituency versus project team allegiance; issues of replacement as top-level experts are more difficult to replace; and, skepticism inhibiting the beneficial effects of swift trust in virtual team formation.

TRUSTING OTHERS IN CONDITIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

Trust has been viewed as a lubricant to cooperation (Arrow, 1974; Misztal, 1996), as a product of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984) and as a way of dealing with imperfect knowledge and uncertainty about others' behavior (Gambetta, 2000). Therefore, we can expect trust to be relevant to those virtual team and metateam contexts exhibiting a high need for cooperation amid conditions of