

# Using Computer Mediated Communication as a Tool to Facilitate Intercultural Collaboration of Global Virtual Teams

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## INTRODUCTION

Many multinational companies (MNCs) have inevitably assembled and employed global virtual teams (GVTs) to leverage their work performance. GVTs are considered as an innovative and flexible work structure to achieve competitiveness in the era of globalization. The emergence of this structure is also due to the heavy reliance on computer-mediated communication technology and, as such, geographical boundaries and time zones are no longer considered as a hindrance to collaboration and communication. Yet, cultural differences remain challenging when team members work together in a non-located environment when they are engaged in managerial tasks such as problem-solving, negotiations, decision-making, and coordination.

Thus, this new distributed collaborative phenomenon suggests that one of the key challenges in working together apart is the ability to adapt and acculturate to different cultural values that exist among team members. People need to be fully aware, understand, and be sensitive to the impact of cultural differences by exploiting appropriate online behaviors in order to reduce its detrimental influence on work performance.

The purpose of this article is to present and understand the dynamics of intercultural collaboration within global virtual teams and how culture impacts their work performance in MNCs. Individuals from all over the world with diverse cultural backgrounds are increasingly collaborating using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies such as e-mail, Web, chat and videoconferencing, and others. Existing literature shows that when people with different cultural values communicate, it is not unusual for miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misinterpretations to occur (Chen, 2001; Gudykunst, 2003). Problems are intensified in CMC environment because of its limitation such as the absence of body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and many others (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1996).

However, little research has been conducted on the ways in which different intercultural communication styles and cultural values affect people working in a distributed or virtual environment, particularly on team members' performance. Thus, in this article, first, I will introduce the phenomenon of GVTs and its crucial function in MNCs. Second, I will present the background of the phenomenon by highlighting the gaps as identified between two research fields--cross-cultural management and computer-mediated communication. Next, the main focus of the article will be a discussion of the issue of intercultural collaboration. In this section, I will first provide a definition of GVTs, followed by several arguments on cultural challenges of GVTs. In the subsequent section, I will discuss the different types of CMC that are available to GVTs and the impact of culture on its utilization. Then, I will provide a brief direction of the future research agenda comprising of both the practical as well as theoretical perspectives. In conclusion, the article will highlight the significance of using GVTs in MNCs when people engage more prominently in intercultural collaboration, using CMC in order to promote and expand international business.

## BACKGROUND

Without a doubt, GVTs have become the prevalent work structure for many MNCs. In a report by Gartner Group Survey, it was projected that 60% of the professional and management tasks at Global 2000 companies would be done via virtual teams by 2004 (Biggs, 2000). Unfortunately, the same survey projected that 50% of virtual teams would fail to meet either strategic or operational objectives due to an inability to manage the distributed workforce implementation risks. To be effective, GVTs require innovative communication and learning capabilities among different team members across organizational and geographical

boundaries. As a result, the intra- and inter-team social interactions and work processes of GVTs cannot be compared to collocated team structures or treated as such by global managers.

GVTs have many potential advantages: They can create culturally-synergistic solutions, enhance creativity and cohesiveness among team members, promote a greater acceptance of new ideas, and thus provide a competitive advantage for the company. On the other hand, GVTs also present major challenges. In fact, findings from Dube and Pare (2001) suggest that global virtual teams face more challenges than localized virtual teams or collocated teams. Possible disadvantages include: Decision-making tends to be more time-consuming, negotiation styles are more divergent, coping mechanisms are complicated to implement, and communication styles and preferences are distinctively unique. People thus encounter misunderstandings and misinterpretations that lead to heightened uncertainties, stress, and conflict among and within team members, all less easily or quickly dissolved and managed.

Several studies were conducted to understand the impact of culture on globally-distributed collaboration. For example, Shachaf (2005) stated that the use of e-mail by GVTs helped alleviate intercultural miscommunication stemming from language factors (less accuracy, slower speech, and translations), while the non-verbal cues are totally eliminated. In her qualitative study, Shachaf interviewed GVT members from multinational corporations (41 participants from nine different countries). On the other hand, Paul, Samarah, Seetharaman, and Mykytyn (2004) studied collaborative conflict management styles by comparing homogenous and heterogeneous virtual teams using the experiment method. They examined individual versus collectivist cultural orientations, and found that collaborative style was influenced by cultural factors, and that group diversity moderated the relationship between collaborative style and team performance. Likewise, Cogburn and Levinson (2003) carried out a case study of students from the U.S. and Africa participating in an online class to investigate factors that influence the success or failure of collaborative distributed learning. They also argued that cultural differences do exist in communication, work ethic, and academic styles, and that these differences in turn affect the growth of trust between American and African students.

Other studies found similar results. For example, Lee (2002) observed that the pattern of e-mail use

is different between Eastern and Western cultures, and Pauleen and Yoong (2001) found that cultural boundaries impacted the ability to build relationship in virtual teams. Massey, Montoya-Weiss, Hung, and Ramesh (2001) suggested that teams from U.S., Asia, and Europe significantly differ in their perceptions of task technology fit. Other studies with similar results include the impact of culture on coordination in GVTs (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000) and communication (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000). According to Suchan and Hayzak (2001), individuals in GVTs normally work independently, autonomously, and have inner-directed motivations. Yet they are also interdependent, need trust and commitment from others, and share power and leadership based on members' technical and knowledge expertise.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF INTERCULTURAL COLLABORATION WITHIN GVTs**

Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) define global virtual teams as groups that (a) are identified by their organization(s) and members as a team; (b) are responsible for making and/or implementing decisions important to the organization's global strategy; (c) use technology-supported communication substantially more than face-to-face communication; and (d) work and live in different countries. A virtual team is also defined as "a temporary, culturally-diverse, geographically-dispersed, electronically-communicating work group" (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999, p. 792). The notion of temporary in the definition describes team members that may have never worked together before and who may not expect to work together again as a group (Jarvenpaa & Ives, 1994; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000).

There are many benefits of using global virtual teams due to the increased number of options and resources they provide. Jarvenpaa and Leidner explain that "virtual teams promise the flexibility, responsiveness, lower costs, and improved resource utilization necessary to meet ever-changing task requirements in highly-turbulent and dynamic global business environments (1999, p. 791)." Moreover, the use of global virtual teams provides an opportunity to coordinate complex business tasks across a potentially far-flung confederation of organizations. This allows companies to better communicate and coordinate even though vast

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