

Chapter 38

Utilizing Virtual Technology as a Tool to Enhance the Workforce Diversity Learning

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ABSTRACT

New technologies for sharing information and communication are being developed every day. Such technologies have become critical to organizations and are needed to bridge the global distance gap. The ability for employees to meet virtually and interact with domestic and global partners is priceless. This ubiquitous communication ability also can be used to promote diversity and equality in the workplace. In this chapter, the increased global role of technology in the workplace and how its use can benefit and/or hinder diversity objectives will be discussed. Additionally, an innovative course delivery method will be used to demonstrate how students in diversity courses can use virtual technologies to build skills and develop intercultural and global competencies by learning from and interacting with students from around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization requires both cross-cultural communication skills and intercultural savvy (Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005). This changing marketplace coupled with technology has changed how we work and how we communicate with colleagues, customers and various stakeholders. Effective cross-cultural communication skills are required by all managers because they must speak regularly with individuals from many cultures even though they may never leave their office (Gregersen et al., 1998). This fact,

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means business schools must develop students with intercultural competency. Moreover, globalization has created a need for global virtual teams (GVT). GVTs are teams that are globally dispersed and connected through technology. That means there is less need for “brick and mortar” organizations. The reduction of organization regulated “brick and mortar” meeting places and other physical constraints can create more opportunities for the physically disabled, economically disadvantaged, elderly and parents of small children. The ability to work from anywhere can increase convenience factors and reduce overhead and expenses. It can also limit the many negatives that occur from day to day social interaction.

Yet, such a convenience can come at a cost. As organizations become more global minded they will face both domestic and international challenges. Cultural diversity and its challenges will need to be managed. The ability to be more diverse with less hurdles can present a problem, as women, economically disadvantaged, elderly and handicap workers still demonstrate a lack in technical skills and are less likely to engage with information technology (Coder, L., et al, 2009). Moreover, the lack of social engagement from a higher dependency on technology can prohibit promotions and other organizational benefits. Additionally, organizations will need to modify job descriptions and other policies, procedures and practices to account for the change in communication mediums.

In this chapter, global virtual teams, virtual technologies such as teleconferences, video conferences, web conferences, hybrid meetings, and virtual meeting tools such as webex, and other organizational technology mediums will be highlighted. Additionally, technology’s changing role in the workplace and how its use can benefit and/or hinder diversity objectives will be discussed. Next, an innovative course delivery method will be used to demonstrate how students in diversity courses can use virtual technologies to build skills and develop intercultural and global competencies similar to GVT in global organizations by interacting and learning from and with students from around the world. The innovative course delivery method is called Virtual cross-cultural experiences (VCCE). VCCE can facilitate intercultural sensitivity and other critical learning that adds to the diversity skill set.

The VCCE in this chapter was designed and integrated in a 15 week semester at two universities. Students voluntarily enrolled in a Managing Diversity class in a mid-sized Midwestern University in the US. Additionally, students enrolled in a similarly offered course at a midsize university in the UK. Students were informed prior to scheduling for courses that they would be working jointly with students from a university in London and the US. Students attended class in their home country and a group project was undertaken in each class. Each group consisted of students from both the UK and the US. This innovative approach required each of the group members to remain in their home country. Each group met according to agreed times using social media and virtual meeting technologies in order to communicate and complete their group projects.

VCCE was undertaken as a result of a project grant from Procter & Gamble to develop global innovations in curricula, particularly those that could be transferred from one institution to another. The grant allowed for the purchase of 20 iPads to be used by the US students. Each iPad was installed with WebEx software, the software typically used by GVTs in many organizations. Upon the completion of the course, students were surveyed about their experience and intercultural learning in order to assess the benefits, challenges, and insights. Suggested changes and overall effectiveness of the VCCE was also recorded. The results of this VCCE will be discussed in this chapter. Moreover, advantages, disadvantages and managerial implications for diverse work environments will be examined. Finally, the chapter will be concluded with recommendations for the future.

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