Chapter 28
Using Global Virtual Teams to Leverage Workforce Diversity in Global Environments:
Applications of CE Technology and ThinkLets

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ABSTRACT

Although Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) provide organizations with increased competitive advantages and greater flexibility due to their unique ability to transcend the traditional boundaries of time, location, and organizational constraints, managing globally dispersed and culturally diverse GVTs also poses unique challenges. This chapter explores some of the challenges affecting GVTs by examining extant literature on team diversity, team conflict, and collaboration technology. Additionally, it further argues that organizations can greatly benefit from integrating the tenets of adaptable Collaboration Engineering technology and thinkLets into their GVT processes to develop sustainable team collaboration and a sense of structure in the virtual team context.

INTRODUCTION

There has been growing interest for utilizing the collective knowledge among employee teams as organizations are increasingly integrating work teams into their permanent organizational structure (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Additionally, with the advent of technological innovation and globalization, virtual teams have emerged as another popular, contemporary format of teams (Boudreau, Loch, Robey, & Straub, 1998; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). The information age has indeed provided organizations with technologies that can potentially lead to cost reductions,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1812-1.ch028

operational efficiency, and acquisition of highly skilled employees without geographical and time barriers (Duarte & Snyder, 2006; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). While virtual teams can overcome traditional constraints of time, location, and organizational boundaries for globally-operated organizations, they are not immune from potential disadvantages and their use poses unique challenges to organizations. One of the most significant challenges for organizations is the lack of direct member interactions due to geographical and temporal separation found in virtual teams and how virtual collaboration should thus be fostered for synergistic teamwork in the absence of such interactions (Hymowitz, 1999).

This chapter explores some of the challenges affecting global virtual teams by examining extant literature on team diversity, team conflict, and technology applied to the global virtual context. It is proposed that organizations can adopt the idea behind Collaboration Engineering (CE) to increase the efficacy of virtual teamwork. CE is a research-based approach to designing, deploying, and sustaining collaborative processes, which can be executed by practitioners in an organization (Briggs, de Vreede, & Nunamaker, 2003). Specifically, we explore the feasibility of using CE models for virtual teams to develop predictable patterns of member behavior and a sense of structure often lacking in the virtual team context.

Operationalizing Global Virtual Teams

A virtual team is generally defined as a group of geographically dispersed individuals cooperating to achieve a common goal with the aid of technology to link them across time, space, and other organizational barriers (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). However, virtual teams are a relatively new form of teaming in that the term "virtual" has been applied rather liberally in the literature to represent varying types of teams (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). Virtual teams can take various formats and configurations contingent upon organizational needs and resource availability (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). For instance, virtual teams can be formed within the same organization but can connect departmental members operating in geographically dispersed locations. Virtual teams can also be configured for facilitating collaborative work among different departments within the same organization. Finally, in some virtual teams, culturally and geographically diverse individuals are specifically brought together to elicit a common understanding of a goal. While recognizing multiple forms and configurations inherent in virtual teams, this chapter specifically focuses on Global Virtual Team (GVT) and defines GVT as globally dispersed, culturally diverse, and technologically connected individuals who work interdependently with a limited life span of membership in order to accomplish a common goal.

TWO SALIENT FEATURES OF GVTs AND CONFLICT

Virtualness in GVTs

It is necessary to explain the dimensions of virtualness in order to fully elucidate the dynamic nature of GVTs. Neale and Griffith (2001) have provided a multidimensional framework to understand the range of virtualness by classifying it into three dimensions: 1) physical distance ranging from close to far; 2) the level of technology support ranging from low to high; and 3) the percentage of time that team members are apart on the task ranging from 0 to 100 percent (Figure 1). The framework by Neale and Griffith offers an insightful conceptualization of virtualness in analyzing GVTs, which is a relatively recent phenomenon of teaming in globally operating organizations. In traditional (face-to-face) teams, members need to be physically close, require low technology support, and spend little time apart, whereas in hybrid