Cultural Influences on Virtual Teamwork Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses culture influence on virtual teamwork collaboration efficiency. We can understand culture as a framework of meanings, which gives a certain group of people the same linguistic framework, collective interpretation of the environment, its ways of self understanding, its customs, traditions, and values. Culture also involves the human spirit, personal expression, principles, and moral commitments. Culture shapes the way people interpret and send messages and the way they think about issues like contractual obligations, work procedures or professional ethics (Lavoire, 2001).

Dispersed ways of working started to exist to respond to expertise constraints, created by downsizing, mergers, and acquisitions, globalization, and employee preferences. Since the early 1980s, organizations started to offer their employees a combination of nontraditional work practices, settings, and locations to supplement traditional offices. Different terms try to cover different practices and policies of geographically dispersed work such as *teleworking, telecommuting, working-at-home, working-at-a-distance, remote work,* and *virtual work.* Although this subject has been discussed for many years, a universal definition still is not in place (Johnson, 2001). For practical and academic reasons we will use Nancy Johnson's (2001) definition, which states that **v**irtual work is a mode of work in which employees perform all or significant part of their roles from a base physically separated of their employers, and where Information technology plays an important role in virtual teamwork by supporting all business practices to create, share and communication among team members.

There are two main reasons why 46 million people that telecommuted in the United States in 2005: cost savings and the increase in productivity (Langhoff, 2005). But geographically dispersed, cross-functional teams also claim to enhance learning and innovation. They are expected to be more creative, since their members bring different intellectual and occupational backgrounds (Boutellier, Gassman, Macho, & Roux, 1998; Brown & Eisenhart 1995; De Meyer, 1993a, 1993b; Gordon & Motwani, 1996; Leonard, 1995; Madhavan & Grover, 1998). Empirical evidence suggests that diversity constrains effective sharing, because there are occupational and contextual constraints. The interpretive barriers rise from differences in perspectives, priorities, and typical approaches to problem solving, and even terminology, and they may come from the specific social or physical contexts. They hinder understanding and team cohesion among different functional units, occupational workgroups, and across localities (Sole & Applegate, 2001).

In other words, different cultural backgrounds bring different perspectives on the same subject, creating a great opportunity for knowledge sharing and learning, but it also creates barriers, because group participants may not share the same language code (even when they agree that English should be used as a common language among participants), norms, and procedures. Thus, work progress may face some challenges that will influence e-collaboration. Here we will discuss those challenges and opportunities on the face of cultural issues.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON WORK PATTERNS

Culture consists of specific learned norms based on attitudes, values, and beliefs, all of which exist in every society. There is evidence of culture pervasive importance. Culture cannot easily be isolated from such factors as economic and political conditions and institutions. Considerable evidence indicates that some aspects of culture differ significantly across national borders and have a substantial impact on how business is normally conducted in different countries. Lavoie (2001) believes that to determine the wealth generating potential of a society, we need to ask about mineral resources, but also about more subjective factors, such

as the value of a society's stock capital, or society's entrepreneurial growth potential, both related with culture, here understood as a framework of meaning, that affect nations, business or group results.

Culture is transmitted by various patterns, such as from parent to child, from teacher to pupil, from social leader to follower, and from peer to peer. However, because of multiple influences, individual and societal values and customs may evolve over time. Change may come through choice or imposition. Change by choice may take place as a by-product of social and economic change or because of contacts with other cultures and their business practices that present reasonable alternatives.

Cultural tied behavioral practices affects business, such as the role of competence. In countries under the influence of the United States, a person's acceptability for jobs and promotions is based on competence. Thus, the workplace is characterized more in competition than in cooperation. In many cultures, competence is secondary importance, and the belief that it is right to place some other criterion ahead of competence is just as strong in those cultures as the belief in competence is in the United States. In some countries, an autocratic style of management is preferred; in others, a consultative style prevails. Interestingly, those preferring an autocratic style are also willing to accept decision making by a majority of subordinates (Daniels & Radebaugh, 1998).

We have also to consider that there is low-context cultures—that is most people consider relevant only information that receive firsthand and that bears very directly on the decision they need to make. They also spend little time on "small talk" in business situations. High context cultures—that is, most people consider that peripheral and hearsay information are necessary for decision making because they bear on the context of the situation. As we can imply, these differences between low and high context cultures may create different business process approaches, which may lead to a better conclusion or a great misunderstanding.

We can understand organizational culture as the set of fundamental assumptions about what products the organization should produce, how it should produce them, where and for which customers. Organizational culture is a powerful unifying force that restrains political conflict and promotes common understanding, agreements and procedures. The organizational culture is also able to restrain change, especially technological

changes, because it threatens commonly held cultural assumptions, and it creates a great deal of resistance (Laudon & Laudon, 2001). There may be some organizations that value change and technology, and others that do not pay attention to that. It may influence virtual work and technology adoption.

ALTERNATIVE WORKPLACES AND MANAGEMENT OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Companies are investing in alternative workplaces since the 80's, and the most obvious reason is cost reduction. By eliminating offices, for example, business can save millions of dollars a year. Alternative workplaces, combined with communication technologies, and the use of personal computers, handhelds and other communication devices create the right environment to have teleworkers, people that may operate at home, or mobile. Virtual employees tend to devote less time to office routines, and more time to customers, improving productivity and effectiveness on the job. Alternative workplaces give companies an edge to retain talented, highly motivated employees who find flexibility to work from home especially attractive (Carr, 1999).

Potential benefits are clear, but at the same time, alternative workplaces are not for everyone. Organizations readiness to adopt the program is a must, in the cultural and technological point of view. Most of the times, managing cultural changes and systems improvements required by these programs are substantial, and the same happen to create virtual teams.

The management philosophy and style needs to be more informational, rather than industrial, in order to give room to alternative workplaces arrangements. Informational organizations operate mainly through voice and data communications. They are not necessarily high tech, but employees style are flexible, informal, change when necessary, have a sense of respect for personal time and priorities, and are committed to use technology to improve performance. Industrial, in this context, means that organization's structure, systems, and management processes are designed for intensive face-to-face interaction and that employees remain rooted to specific workplaces. Thus, a dynamic, non-hierarchical, technology driven organization is more likely to adopt alternative workplaces programs than a highly command-driven one, because its culture is more open and fosters proactive ways of doing a job.

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