

Managing Intercultural Communication Differences in E-Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

With the heightened trends of globalization and increased sophistication of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, people can collaborate anywhere, at anytime, and with anyone. Thus, it can be argued that distance no longer matters. Yet at the same time, people will continue to be confronted with different cultural backgrounds that present conflicts in terms of value systems, attitudes, beliefs, and basic assumptions. In this respect culture does matter, even at a distance. As such multinational corporations (MNCs) need to ascertain the compatibility between the types of technology to be selected and used, and their employees' cultural values when they assemble global virtual teams from all parts of the world.

Global virtual teams can be defined as people who work in a geographically and organizationally dispersed locations, composed of heterogeneous team members, and they use computer-mediated communication technologies during e-collaboration (Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wilemon, 2004). Due to the increasing use of global virtual teams as a new working structure, MNCs need to manage intercultural communication, defined as interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds with distinct communication patterns, preferences, and styles (Novinger, 2001; Gudykunst, 1997). Edward Hall (1976), an intercultural communication theorist, has established that different cultures communicate using different styles that impact face-to-face communication and collaboration. In addition, manifestations of culture are often shown in a person's intercultural communicative behaviors.

Several studies have established that communicative behaviors vary across and within cultures, and that these variations can be explained by Hall's concept of cultural diversity. In his theory called high vs. low context, he explained that communicative behavior is strongly rooted in one's cultural background. For example, in high context cultures (e.g., Malaysia, Korea, Japan, France, etc.), people put more emphasis

on non-verbal cues, and in low context cultures (e.g., USA, UK, Italy, Australia, etc.), people rely more on words spoken or written.

In order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretations, it is important to comprehend the meaning in what a person says and also how things are said—that is, the communication style one uses for generating ideas, exchanging opinions, sharing knowledge, and expressing ideas. Therefore, this article presents two key research questions:

1. What are the impacts of culture on the global virtual teams' performance during e-collaboration?
2. How do MNCs build intercultural communication competencies to manage cultural differences among global virtual teams?

This article will be organized as follows: in the first section, I will introduce the phenomenon of globally distributed collaboration, or what I term e-collaboration, to point out the significance of a new working structure—global virtual teams. Next, I will present the research gaps that are identified between cross-cultural management, intercultural communication, and CMC to provide concrete background to the phenomenon. Third, I will highlight the potential cultural impacts on e-collaboration. Fourth, I will provide a conceptual framework of building intercultural communication competencies, with suggestions on how to manage the cultural differences in global virtual teams. Finally, I will conclude the article by providing some managerial and theoretical implications of e-collaboration.

BACKGROUND

Based on the past studies, substantial empirical research in cross-cultural management and intercultural communication literature has established that numerous challenges arise when people of different cultures

collaborate and communicate at an interpersonal level (Adler, 2002; Gudykunst, 2003; Hooker, 2003). The findings suggest that the challenges that exist in one's communicative behaviors can lead to potential managerial problems such as communication misunderstandings and misinterpretations, intensified conflicts, failure to coordinate, ineffective decision-making, anxieties and uncertainties, and many more (Adler, 2002; Gudykunst & Kim, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

In a similar vein, CMC literature has observed that technology may facilitate or hinder effective communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1996) depending on the compatibility of values such as task fit vs. culture fit vs. technology fit. Daft and Lengel's (1984) theory of media richness explains that whether a technology is appropriate for a given managerial task depends on the technology's richness or leanness. E-mail is considered a lean medium, since it relies solely on written text, and videoconferencing is considered a rich medium, since it has verbal, audio, and visual components. Daft and Lengel argue that e-mail fails to evoke sufficient and necessary social and contextual cues and that such technology may therefore not be desirable or effective in a culture that is highly dependent on non-verbal cues when communicating, as in the high context cultures. In contrast, for a culture that is dependent on words or the content of a message such as low context culture, e-mail would be an appropriate tool that facilitates distributed collaboration and communication.

It is well established that computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows people to communicate and collaborate unrestricted by barriers of time and space. Additionally, given the distributed and non-hierarchical nature of global virtual teams, CMC is an ideal method of communication among the members. CMC is defined as a process whereby messages are electronically transmitted from senders to receivers in both synchronous and asynchronous settings (Elton, 1982; Olaniran, 1994). CMC allows for both dyadic and conference (multiuser) interactions. CMC does not include the methods by which two computers communicate, but rather how people communicate using computers.

CMC technologies are just tools that facilitate the communication that takes places between the members. Yet, what is more important is to understand the human dynamics when they use such collaborative technologies to work more effectively across geographical distance.

Therefore, cultural barriers stemming from different managerial aspects and communication styles may adversely affect various elements of collaboration such as negotiations, deliberation of ideas, self-disclosure, conflict resolution, coordination, decision making, and so on (Thorne, 2003). Potential culture-related management problem areas include overcoming high anxiety and uncertainty of feelings (Gudykunst, 1997), managing conflicting and frustrating situations (Adler, 2002), saving face in confrontational situations (Ting-Toomey, 1999), making effective group decisions (Oetzel, 2005), using language and non-verbal communication (Lim, 2003; Tayeb, 2003), and adjusting to and acculturating in a new environment (Kim, 1990).

Without doubt, the need to recognize cultural problems stemming from this new collaborative working structure is crucial for MNCs. However, little empirical research has attempted to bridge the areas of intercultural communication and cross-cultural management, and CMC (Amant, 2002; Olaniran, 2001). Therefore, there is a crucial need to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the cultural influence on the use of CMC in order to provide a concrete understanding of the phenomenon of working together apart as in the context of global virtual teams.

CULTURAL IMPACTS ON E-COLLABORATION

As previously mentioned, global virtual teams are using CMC at an intensified rate. Although team members no longer need to meet face-to-face and confront varied cultural shocks from their first-hand experience, nonetheless they will still encounter anxieties and uncertainties through CMC because of the differences that exist in their communication contextual values (Hall & Hall, 1990). Edward Hall (1976) developed an intercultural communication theory called high vs. low context. He introduces this dimension as a continuous spectrum which illustrates the degree to which a person pays attention to non-verbal cues in a communicative situation. In this article, however, the concept of context will only be elaborated in term of the two extreme values—high vs. low context. In essence, high context culture emphasizes settings or the environment (i.e., context) while low context culture emphasizes words (i.e., content—verbal or written).

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