Interacting Effectively in International Virtual Offices

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INTRODUCTION

Communication technologies are continually changing ideas of the "office." One of the most interesting of these developments is the virtual office—a setting where individuals in different places use online media to collaborate on projects. Recent trends, furthermore, indicate knowledge workers will become increasingly involved in international virtual offices (IVOs) where they interact with coworkers in different countries. Such environments, however, can intensify problems related to cultural communication expectations. Employees must therefore understand how cultural factors can affect online discourse if they wish to work successfully in IVOs. This essay examines three IVO-related problem areas: contact, status, and language.

BACKGROUND

Perceived Advantages

One interesting aspect of virtual offices is the speed with which organizations are adopting them (McCloskey & Weaver, 2001; Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). A major factor behind this trend is that such workplaces offer:

- Increased flexibility and quicker responsiveness (Scuhan & Hayzak, 2001)
- Better information sharing and improved knowledge management (Ruppel & Harrington, 2001)
- Reduced absenteeism
- Increased employee loyalty
- Improved productivity (Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001)

These factors also make virtual offices excellent mechanisms for knowledge-based tasks that benefit from effective information exchanges (Belanger, 1999; Ruppel & Harrington, 2001). Interested organizations, however, must also consider the effects globalization could have on such environments.

Intercultural Environments

The interest in virtual offices is occurring at a time when more nations are gaining online access. The governments of India and China, for example, have adopted strategies to increase their respective numbers of online connections markedly (Pastore, 2004; Section IV, 2003). At the same time, different public and private organizations have undertaken initiatives to increase online access in Africa and in Latin America (Kalia, 2001; Tapping in to Africa, 2000; Tying Latin America together, 2001). Additionally, the number of individuals going online in Eastern Europe is growing rapidly and has made the region a hub for software-based outsourcing (Goolsby, 2001; New geography, 2003; Weir, 2004).

This increased global access provides quick and easy connections to relatively inexpensive yet highly skilled technical workforces (Baily & Farrell, 2004; New geography, 2003). This situation has prompted some companies to explore international virtual offices (IVOs) in which individuals located in different nations use online media to collaborate on projects. These IVOs can lower product cost and a shorter production time (New geography, 2003). Yet this situation creates challenges related to cultural communication expectations.

Intercultural Communication

Cultural groups can have differing expectations of what constitutes an appropriate method for exchanging information. Such variations can even occur between individuals from the same linguistic background (Driskill, 1996; Weiss, 1998). Individuals from different cultures can use different strategies for presenting information, and such expectations can occur at various

levels involving everything from the organization of reports to the implications associated with certain words (Hofstede, 1997; Li & Koole, 1998; Ulijn & Strother, 1995). Moreover, Jan M. Ulijn's (1996) research findings indicate individuals judge the effectiveness of a message according to the communication expectations of their native culture, even when that message is written in another language.

While relatively little has been written on how cultural factors could affect IVOs, some research indicates differing cultural communication expectations can lead to miscommunication in online exchanges (see St. Amant, 2002). Today's employees must therefore understand how cultural factors could affect online exchanges if they wish to participate successfully in IVOs. These employees also need to develop strategies to address such factors when interacting in IVOs.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Three central areas related to information exchange in IVOs are:

1. Making contact
2. Status and communication expectations
3. Use of a common language

Such aspects are often overlooked within the greater context of online work interactions. These three factors, however, could cause cross-cultural communication problems if not addressed. This section overviews each problem area and provides strategies for mitigating such problems.

Area 1: Making Contact

Successful international online interactions are based on contact because it is essential to exchange information and materials among parties. Making contact requires all parties to have similar understandings of how and when exchanges should occur. Yet cultures can have varying expectations of how and when contact should be made.

To begin, cultural groups can have different expectations of the exigency associated with a particular medium. Many Americans, for example, believe e-mails merit quick response. In Ukrainian culture, however, face-to-face communication is often valued over other interactions, especially in business settings (Richmond, 1995). Thus, e-mail to Ukrainian coworkers might not receive as rapid a response as American counterparts might like (Mikelonis, 1999). If the American counterpart needs this information to complete a task, that process would be slowed by such delayed responses.

Another factor affecting contact is when one can contact international coworkers. Many Americans, for example, expect to be able to contact coworkers or clients between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. during the work week. In France, however, offices often close for two hours for the traditional lunch period (generally from noon to 2:00 p.m. or 1:00–3:00 p.m.), and such situations could cause unexpected and problematic delays in contacting colleagues (Weiss, 1998).

Similarly, most Americans think of vacations in terms of 2 or 3 weeks, and during the height of the summer vacation season, someone is often in the office to answer the phones. In France, however, businesses often close for 4–6 weeks during the summer while all employees are on vacation (Weiss, 1998). In these cases, no one may be available to respond to e-mails or transmit information.

Additionally, the meaning individuals associate with certain terms can affect information exchanges in IVOs. The meanings of "today," "yesterday," and "tomorrow," for example, are context dependent and can create problems in international exchanges. If, for example, a worker in the United States tells a Japanese colleague she needs a report by "tomorrow," does the sender mean tomorrow according to her time (which could be "today" in Japan) or tomorrow according to Japanese time (which could be two days from when the message was sent)?

To avoid such problems, individuals can adopt certain strategies for interacting with international colleagues:

- **Agree upon the primary medium for exchanging information and establish expectations for when responses can be sent via that medium.** Individuals participating in IVOs need to agree upon the best medium for contacting others when a quick response is essential. For example, should e-mail be the primary medium for quick exchanges? If so, how often should participants be expected to check e-mail during the day, and how quickly should all parties respond to urgent e-mails? Additionally, all parties should under-