Chapter 13
Understanding Diversity in Virtual Work Environments:
A Comparative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a comparative case study which was conducted with the aim of understanding how diversity can be managed in the context of the virtual work environment. The authors argue that the unique characteristics of virtuality might influence how diversity is managed in the virtual, computer-mediated environment. In view of this, a comparative case study involving qualitative interviews with participants from two contrasting environments—a face-to-face one and a virtual one—is presented. The findings of the study show what types of diversity are found to be important in the virtual workplace and also start to unpack the relationship between some of the unique characteristics of virtuality and diversity within the context of this study. The contributions of the study are discussed and recommendations to both future researchers and also practitioners are provided.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the development of information and communications technology (ICT) has enabled organizations to deploy virtual teams (VTs) in their effort to reach out to global expertise and resources and, by extension, improve their overall competitiveness and performance (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Gurău, 2011; Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009; Nemiro, Bradley, Beyerlein, & Beyerlein, 2008; Tong, Yang, & Teo, 2013; Workman, 2007). VTs are known for these unique benefits but also for their unprecedented challenges in the literature. Scholars in the field of Industrial-Organizational (I-O) psychology as well as in kindred fields, such as information systems (IS), agree that diversity and heterogeneity feature as unique characteristics of VTs and virtual organizations (Chamakiotis, Dekoninck, & Panteli,

2013; Martin, 2014). The notion of diversity is based on respect, acceptance, and equality for all. It recognizes individual differences and involves understanding of not only the way of being, but also the way of knowing (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). There are different types of diversity in the extant literature, for example, it can be demographic (i.e., sex, race or age) or based on personal attributes such as status, experience, expertise, or lifestyle (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Diversity in the workplace mainly concerns the visible characteristics (i.e., race, gender) or job-related attributes (i.e., educational background and tenure) (Ibid.).

With regards to the virtual environment in particular, diversity plays a crucial role because it helps to produce greater solutions to problems (Comfort & Franklin, 2014). However, working in the virtual environment involves working without physical proximity, across cultures and time zones, which can be very challenging (Klitmøller, Schneider, & Jonsen, 2015). According to recent research studies, VTs are expected to dominate the global workforce by 2020 (de Kare-Silver, 2011). For many organizations, success will depend on how adaptable teams are in the light of ICT and globalization, which is seen as affecting the way in which people do their jobs (Pierce & Hansen, 2013). But why is the study of diversity in the virtual context important?

Managing diversity in the workplace is important as it can impact on the establishment of good working relationships and the levels of trust between co-workers (Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006). On one hand, good relationships between co-workers are critical because they often can affect group performance, attendance, and employee turnover and therefore organizational performance (Dumas, Phillips, & Rothbard, 2013). On the other hand, the notion of trust is related to relationships at work because its lack is likely to diminish performance and increase employee turnover. Godar and Ferris (2004) argue that trust constitutes the cement that binds the team together to work towards the common goal.

In the context of VTs, the literature posits that developing trust among diverse members is challenging, with factors such as uncommon backgrounds between VT members and lack of physical proximity contributing to this (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2004; Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; DeRosa, Hantula, Kock, & D'Arcy, 2004; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Panteli & Duncan, 2004). Given the dispersed nature of work, members of VTs are known to develop swift trust, rather than competency- and emotional-based trust (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013). The concept of swift trust describes the creation and development of trust relations in short-term VTs, in the absence of pre-existing working relationships among workers (Germain & McGuire, 2014). It is different from the traditional form of trust in that it is competence-based, rather than integrity-based.

Following from the above commentary, a theoretical gap emerges as to how this increased diversity can be managed in the virtual context. What types of diversity are important in the virtual environment? What are the factors influencing diversity in the virtual environment and how do they relate to those influencing diversity in the traditional workplace? Which of the unique characteristics of virtuality influence diversity and how? This chapter seeks to address these questions by focusing on a comparative case study involving interviews with workers from two contrasting research sites—a traditional, collocated one and a virtual, computer-mediated one. This study is important to scholars and practitioners alike, as well as to educators and students whose work involves collaboration in virtual environments characterized by increased diversity and heterogeneity. In what follows, a literature review on the above topics is presented.

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