

Chapter 35

Application of Collaboration Technology to Manage Diversity in Global Virtual Teams: The ThinkLet–Based CE Approach

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ABSTRACT

The present global competitive landscape is urging organizations to reach beyond the conventional limits to gain competitive advantage. With the advent of information and communication technologies available, more organizations are forming Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) that promise more advantages and greater flexibility due to their unique ability to transcend the traditional boundaries of time, geographic locations, and organizational constraints. However, managing globally dispersed and culturally diverse GVTs also poses unique challenges to organizations wishing to capitalize on the potential benefits of GVTs. This chapter explores some of the documented challenges faced by GVTs due to diversity, team conflict, and collaboration technology and further argues that organizations will benefit from integrating the ThinkLet-based CE approach to GVT workflow processes. This method is intended to develop predictable patterns of team collaboration that provide a greater sense of structure in the highly uncertain environment where GVTs operate.

INTRODUCTION

Teamwork in the modern organization has become an integral aspect of strategy in gaining competitive advantage (Chou, Lin, & Chou, 2012). Indeed, there has been a surge of interest in the utilization of collective knowledge of employee teams as organizations are increasingly integrating work teams into their permanent organizational structure. In doing so, organizations differentiate themselves through

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the development of new knowledge that is driven by internal human capital (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; De Clercq, Dimov, & Thongpapanl, 2013). The information age has provided organizations with technologies that can potentially lead to cost reductions, increased operational efficiency, and improved innovation opportunities due to the acquisition of highly skilled employee teams without geographical and time barriers (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004; Maruping & Magni, 2015; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Furthermore, with the advent of communication technologies that eases the transfer of information, virtual teams have become more commonplace within organizations (Boudreau, Loch, Robey, & Straub, 1998; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). Particularly, communication technology platforms have enabled individuals to collaborate on tasks in geographically and temporally dispersed locations, thus spreading the workplace to spaces beyond the traditional setting. Teams that make use of technology as the basis of interaction rather than meeting face-to-face are commonly referred to as virtual teams (also known as dispersed teams) (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). While employing virtual teams overcomes traditional constraints of time, locations, and organizational boundaries for globally-operated organizations, virtual teams are not immune from potential disadvantages and their use poses unique challenges to organizations. Researchers have found that the lack of direct interaction amongst team members tends to disrupt social structures, and such disruptions include socio-emotional linkages, relationship building, or a sense of connectedness to others (Allen & Vakalahi, 2013; Orhan, 2014). Hence, one of the most significant challenges for organizations is to foster synergistic teamwork in the absence of social structures derived from direct interaction among team members (Hymowitz, 1999).

This chapter explores some of the challenges affecting global virtual teams (GVTs) by examining extant literature on team diversity, team conflict, and collaboration technology applied to the global virtual context. It is proposed that the fundamental concepts behind Collaboration Engineering (CE) can be adopted in the context of dispersed team work. CE is a research-based approach to design, deploy, and sustain repeatable collaborative processes which can be executed by practitioners in an organization (Briggs, de Vreede, & Nunamaker, 2003; Briggs, Kolfshoten, de Vreede, Lukosch, & Albrecht, 2013). The thesis behind CE stems from the need of the group to learn and apply collaborative work practices without constantly engaging a professional facilitator. We explore the feasibility of using CE models for GVTs to benefit the workflows of global organizations and further argue that organizations would greatly benefit from integrating CE models to develop predictable process patterns of member interaction 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). The advances in communication technology have enabled organizations to break down spatial, temporal, and other process barriers to connect human capital globally. Additionally, investments in information and communication technologies for collaborative purposes have accrued benefits from the behaviors derived from the adoption of these technologies, further justifying the increased use of virtual teams (Maruping & Magni, 2015). 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 team configurations (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; O’Leary & Cummings, 2007). Virtual teams can take various formats and configurations contingent upon organizational needs and available resources (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). For instance, virtual

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