

## **Managing Communication within Virtual Intercultural Teams**

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### **Abstract**

As global companies rely more on virtual teams to conduct short and long-term projects, business students need to be prepared to manage the communication of intercultural teams. Communicating across cultures using technology can be a difficult task. Best practices in managing the communication of virtual intercultural teams are identified from interviews with four executives and feedback from 90 graduate business students. This information will help business communication faculty to prepare students for the complex job of communicating across languages and cultures on virtual teams.

**Keywords:** global teams, virtual teams, intercultural teams, team communication

Many companies use virtual teams comprising geographically dispersed people to work on short and long-term projects. "Virtual" refers to the electronic communication of team members. Technology-enabled communication allows the team to function, even when physically separated by distance and time zones. Global trade and technology have changed the work environment for organizations of all sizes. With recent technological developments in communications and logistics, smaller companies can now compete in the international marketplace (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). Net collaboration technologies let companies work with partners to bring new products to market with significant savings in time and money. Yet, this Internet-based collaboration is still in its infant stage. Dealing with different cultures and learning how to handle the technology pose the biggest challenges for

collaborative ventures (Keenan & Ante, 2002). Indeed, the two greatest barriers to effective team communication are technology and cultural differences.

This study examines how to help business students manage virtual intercultural team communication. Given globalization and corporate reliance on technology for communication, business students today are likely to participate in virtual intercultural teams in their careers. Business communication faculty can use the strategies presented here to teach students to manage the challenges of communicating in virtual teams. Today's business students need to be prepared to work effectively on multicultural teams in order to compete in the global market, (McCain, 1996).

In spite of the prevalence and potential of multicultural teams, a review of research shows that "in practice, global teams do not often create the value expected" (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Daly, 1996). Language and cultural barriers, technology, distance and time zone differences add complexity to communication in global intercultural teams, and underline the need to prepare business students to function in intercultural virtual teams. This aspect of business communication merits special attention in the curriculum.

To help business communication faculty prepare students in this area, the research here addresses two key questions. How can managers use technology to communicate effectively with team members across cultures and borders? How can managers overcome cultural differences in teams comprising members from diverse cultures?

## **Methodology**

The research reported in this paper comes from two primary sources: 1) 90 graduate business students enrolled in three business communication classes and 2) interviews with four global executives based in France, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.

The graduate business students reported on the outcome of an intercultural team project involving the use of technology and face-to-face communication. Their assignment is described in Figure 1. The assignment involved student reflection on how technology and intercultural differences impacted team communication. The teams wrote up their reflections as part of their final project.

For the project, students were instructed to form their own teams of two to five people. Each team had to have members from at least two different cultures. The intercultural teams worked to complete a six-week project on e-commerce in a mandatory 1.5-credit business communication class. Another business communication specialist, Barrett (2001) has reported on her approach to teaching MBA students to manage intercultural teams

The second source of information came from a group of four global executives who were interviewed about their perspective on virtual intercultural team communication. These executives were experienced international managers, in contrast with the other group in the study of graduate business students. They provided in-depth answers to a questionnaire concerning their

work on multicultural teams. This group consisted of: 1) David—Michelin's chemical purchasing manager for Europe; 2) Ben—a British American finance manager for Intel in Singapore and the U.S.; 3) Lucienne—a Brazilian business development specialist working at the Minority Business Development Center in Phoenix; and 4) Alan— global e-commerce manager at United Parcel Service's headquarters in Atlanta.

### **Managing Technology in Virtual Teams**

What challenges do managers of intercultural teams face when they use technology? How do they overcome these obstacles? See Figure 2 for strategies to communicate via technology on virtual teams.

First, the team needs to understand the advantages and limitations of technology for conducting their communication and work. While technology offers opportunity for frequent, easy, low-cost, around-the-clock communication, it can be an unreliable variable that affects the outcome of team communication and collaboration (Duarte & Snyder, 1999). Problems occur when the network goes down, the technology does not work, or the team member needs more training in how to use the electronic tools. Employees need training in how to use the technologies, and ongoing technical support in the event they encounter problems.

Technology and the communication it enables give companies a competitive advantage in the international environment. Technology helps people in distant places to connect and build relationships without travel. Employees

who travel can stay in close touch with the home office. Virtual teams enable companies to accomplish things more quickly and efficiently. For example, Texas Instruments found that virtual meeting software such as WebEx reduced travel costs and saved time. With WebEx, participants see a slide presentation on their computers, and can instant-message questions and comments throughout the presentation. This software also produced a higher level of feedback from non-native speakers of English. The international meeting participants were more willing to type in their comments using virtual meeting software than in face-to-face meetings, or on conference calls where they worried about speaking English (Overholt, 2002).

In spite of the advantages of technology for virtual team communication, teammates benefit greatly from face-to-face contact, especially at the beginning of the project. This helps establish the working relationship and build trust. Kostner (2001) finds that executives on virtual teams view travel as necessary to develop rapport. The establishment of a personal relationship is an important reason for the business trip, although not necessarily the only reason for the travel. On their trips, they focus more on relationship building than on doing specific tasks. Michelin manager David says, "E-mail works with my network. We're comfortable. We know each other well. I made a deliberate effort that we all got to know each other well at the beginning. And then we could do anything else long distance via technology."

While promoting positive attitudes toward technology, the manager also needs to understand employee resistance to it. To humanize interaction via

technology, virtual team members use personal touches in their communication, such as an exchange of photos by e-mail. As part of a strategy to promote interpersonal communication, they may celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, engagements, and children's achievements electronically. Sometimes, teammates discover that it's possible to make friends for life with people they haven't met. Experienced teams learn how to keep the human touch in their distance communication. Used effectively, technology can enhance an intercultural team's communication, and bring people together across distance and time, regardless of language and cultural differences.

### **Communicating across Language and Culture**

Virtual team communication across cultures presents managers with special challenges. See Figure 3 for a summary of strategies to deal with these challenges.

To communicate effectively across cultures, managers need to develop intercultural sensitivity, good relationships and trust. Ackley and Barker (2001) use four criteria to assess intercultural sensitivity: 1) positive feelings toward interactions with people from other cultures; 2) the positive feelings of people from other cultures toward the individual; 3) successful completion of job; and 4) freedom from culture-contact stress.

Mutual trust plays a key role in successful international alliances and teams, yet managers freely admit that trust is not easy to achieve. Particularly on virtual teams where there is uncertainty and incomplete knowledge of all group

members, trust is a necessary condition for successful teamwork (Child, 2001). Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner (1998) find that trust among global team members depends on their perceptions of each other's ability, integrity, and benevolence. It is important to have on the team individuals who are willing to trust one another.

Managers should make sure everyone understands how diversity strengthens an intercultural team, by recognizing the value each member contributes to the team. Each person clearly brings different personal and cultural perspectives to the task.

David, the Michelin chemical purchasing manager based in France, insists that "you have to have local people who understand the local market" on an efficient team. Obviously, people from different cultures take different approaches to problems. I bring something [as an American] to the European group. For instance, we have a group that buys steel. My American approach tends to be direct, and my American network [team], too. I hope to bridge the communication gap between North America and Europe." He also finds it helpful being American at the French headquarters, talking to the Americans in the U.S.

David explains why Michelin finds the diverse perspectives of intercultural teams so valuable. "We have a French buyer in North America, who brings the French perspective over there. He can explain why we're asking for something. He can speak directly with the French here [at Michelin headquarters in Clermont-Ferrand, France.] No language problem."

Approaches to project management tasks such as scheduling, goal setting, task assignment, and leadership differ across cultures (Milosevic, 1999).

Varner (2001) discusses other important effects of culture on team dynamics, such as the giving and receiving of criticism and feedback, willingness to participate and offer ideas, and contradiction of superiors. In their intercultural team experience, the graduate business students commented on these tasks, as well as the opportunities and challenges of working on intercultural teams. They used e-mail, face-to-face meetings, and, to a lesser extent, phone to carry out their communication.

Many team members in the business communication classes reported that they found working with people from different cultures enhanced the experience for everyone.

Diversity brings a broader range of expertise, resources, and viewpoints to projects (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). In the business communication classes, students commented on how each person added a different perspective, and helped teammates to see things from a different angle. The diversity stimulated new ideas and enhanced creativity. Working on the teams changed their point of view about how people from certain cultures behave, and erased stereotypes.

Getting to know everyone's strengths and backgrounds at the beginning of the project proved to be a valuable strategy. Some teams took advantage of this knowledge by playing to each other's strengths and minimizing weaknesses. Recognizing that teammates had different levels of expertise, experience, skills, and capabilities, these teams distributed the workload accordingly. For example, a team member with excellent organizational skills can direct task assignment,

and monitor completion of each part of the project. A team member with good time management skills builds a timeline and keeps others on track for project completion. Another person's interpersonal skills help resolve conflict and build group consensus when the team has disagreements. One team member might be weak with time management, and strong in interpersonal skills. Another person may lack technical expertise, and rely on teammates who are Internet savvy for assistance.

The graduate business students, who worked in intercultural teams for their e-commerce project in business communication class, identified distinct advantages in working on multicultural teams. Most described the experience as extremely positive. They reported that it was fun, and interesting to learn about other people's cultures while getting the job done. As a byproduct of the class work, they learned how to communicate effectively with people from all over the world. Students exchanged information beyond the scope of the project, and broadened their knowledge of different people, cultures, and places. In the process, they established new friendships. Enjoyment of working on a team was one of three key factors that Snow, Snell, and Davison (1996) identified as critical for the success of a transnational team. The other two key factors for success were commitment to the team's mission and norms, and dependability to perform assigned tasks.

With respect to communication barriers, some teams found it challenging to work with people from different language backgrounds. Several remarked on how the other person may understand something totally different from what was

intended. Some American students worried that other cultures would be offended by U.S. openness and directness in the course of the team communication.

These observations support Thomas's (1999) belief that team members need to understand how cultural differences affect team dynamics and individual ideas about how teams should function.

The business communication class teams identified three basic ways to overcome obstacles to communication: patience, respect, and listening skills. They found that being patient in dealing with differences, open-minded, and respectful made a difference in communicating across cultures. It took time and patience to recognize and adapt to different communication styles and ways of handling meetings. Listening to each other patiently and attentively helped to overcome some communication problems. Teammates let each other know that they understood and appreciated others' points, and addressed them directly. When they didn't understand a point, they persisted in asking questions for clarification.

Having a common goal, such as doing an excellent job on the assignment, also united teams. Others found it helpful to demonstrate a willingness to work things out and keep a dialog going. As a result of the project, students learned strategies to communicate in a challenging environment, develop better listening skills, and improve methods of sharing ideas.

Students learned that working on a team can take more time and effort than doing the same work as an individual. They conceded that the benefits

outweighed the negatives. The finished product was of greater quality and had less chance for errors when all reviewed it.

To communicate across cultures, teammates must build trust and understanding. Not knowing people well can cause serious problems. According to David, the Michelin executive, “If you don’t know the people well, it’s always more complicated. If you don’t have that rapport, even with people from your same culture, e-mail can be dangerous, if you don’t know them well. When you have to get someone to do something, you have to know how to establish that rapport.”

The business communication instructor can make the following key points to help students succeed in intercultural team projects. Being open to learning about other cultures goes a long way to establishing rapport among teammates. Awareness that differences exist in cultural values and beliefs, communication styles, approaches to decision-making, problem solving, and conflict resolution also helps teams to overcome cultural differences. Additionally, team members can break down language barriers by showing respect for other cultures and languages. John Purnell, formerly at Digital Corporation, recommends that global team members show appreciation for cultural differences and the value of people’s time, develop skills in listening, conflict resolution, project planning, and computer literacy (Odenwald, 1996). Iles and Hayers (1997) also believe that transnational project teams need competency in negotiation, strategy, and conflict resolution skills in order to avoid potential conflicts.

The Michelin executive identified the greatest communication challenge he faces: “It’s French!” he laughs. “I can stay in a meeting for an hour OK. Then it’s tiring. One on one, I do OK. In a meeting, it’s hard to participate. And often, I need to lead a meeting. That’s hard to do in French. I’m taking classes, and I’ve got really good support.”

Ben, the Intel executive, identified communication challenges on an interpersonal level, such as understanding the boundaries of what kinds of behavior are acceptable, and how to interact with people from different cultures. He referred to examples in his business experience of people not understanding what level of directness was appropriate. He witnessed other problems when people were too informal with cultures that preferred more formal communication. Other challenges occurred among managers whose cultures tolerated more aggressive and argumentative behavior

### **Communication Strategies for Virtual Teams**

Virtual teams use a variety of communication strategies to get across their message. (See Figure 4). They choose an appropriate communication channel to achieve their purpose, considering the strengths, limitations, and challenges of e-mail, phone, fax, videoconference, and face-to-face. They also must consider the audience. For example, they take into consideration whether their audience consists of peers, junior manager, boss, or external people such as clients. The level of formality and how well they know their audience also affect channel selection.

Generally, communication is easier among peers and teammates, and more difficult between junior managers and bosses, and people that are not well known. More opportunities exist for misunderstanding with different levels of employees and unfamiliar people. Different communication channels offer specific advantages for virtual intercultural teams. Yates and Orlikowski (2002) advocate the use of genre systems such as memos, meetings, reports, training sessions as a means of structuring collaborative work.

### **E-mail**

Virtual teams frequently communicate via e-mail. Some managers estimate it to be 75-80% of their communication. E-mail presents certain advantages for virtual teams from different language and cultural backgrounds, because it allows time for people to compose and process messages. Warkentin, Sayeed, and Hightower (1997) point out that time pressures in synchronous meetings are often absent in asynchronous meetings or e-mail. It also gives them time to edit the message for better clarity before sending it. The receiver also has time to consider the meaning and an appropriate response. The e-mail format and the time it allows both sender and receiver to construct meaning helps the non-native speaker of English to communicate more effectively.

E-mail also helps to overcome language barriers on virtual teams. David comments, "When language is a problem, e-mail is really nice. When you write something down, it helps. E-mail is a much easier way to communicate with someone who is weak in English or French. On the phone, it's very hard to

communicate. In e-mail, you can take time to compose your words, and look something up if you don't know what to say."

If people have questions or need clarification, e-mail makes it easier for them to ask without losing face. According to Ben of Intel, if an executive has a problem understanding something in an e-mail, it is easier to ask questions and request clarification. Such questions over the phone or face-to-face might be embarrassing. In his experience, people don't like to ask for clarification orally, or admit that they cannot understand something.

David, the Michelin manager, and his counterparts in North America, South America, Asia, and Europe primarily use e-mail. He reports, "I send several e-mails a day out to the network. Typically, five to ten messages just from my North American counterpart will be waiting for me when I get in. We bombard each other with e-mails."

The spontaneity and immediacy of e-mail help communication. David explains, "E-mail is nice. You get an idea. You zip it off. You get a fast response. Almost a dialog. The alternative is one big, long e-mail at the end of the day. It's better to have lots of short ones, more immediate and timely." His comments underline the importance of brevity in e-mail communication. Long ones tend to be put off for later. And "later" may never come. Knowing the person at the other end of the e-mail is very helpful, since you are less likely to delete an e-mail from someone you know.

## **Phone**

Ben finds the phone the hardest way to communicate, because one cannot pick up any visual cues. It is especially hard to talk with people from different cultures or nationalities who are non-native speakers of English.

Lucienne from the Minority Business Development Center uses the phone or e-mail for “simple little things.” She prefers face-to-face for important issues.

David uses the phone to have direct and more personal communication with suppliers, whom he knows less well and has less frequent contact with than his network. He knows many of the people he needs to talk with at the plants around the world. As to frequency of phone contact, he talks to one or two suppliers a day, mostly in Europe. Although he uses e-mail with suppliers sometimes, he prefers phone calls because he wants the dialog with them. The personal touch is important, since he doesn't have the daily contact with suppliers that he has with the internal network.

## **Videoconference**

Ben, the finance manager from Intel, participated in videoconferences with his counterparts in Israel and Ireland. Production values make it difficult to work with this medium. The quality of video often is not good, and the resolution, speed, and sound present problems as well. “You expect it to be like TV and it's not.” Apart from seeing what a person looks like, the medium has limited value, in Ben's opinion. He thinks it is easier to have a voice conference, if just a few people are involved.

Michelin headquarters has the capability for videoconference, but they do not use it often. For a large group of people, video has advantages. By phone, it is hard to know who is saying what, when more than two or three people are involved. To get a discussion going with a large group, videoconference works better.

### **Face-to-face**

Face-to-face meetings bring a special chemistry and power to communication. The executives as well as the business students commented on the advantages of face-to-face.

At United Parcel Service headquarters, almost all the meetings are conducted face-to-face. Alan, an executive in global e-commerce, spends almost all of his time in meetings. Face-to-face, there is a special chemistry, and participants get all the nuances. "You spend lots of time arguing, but when you get consensus, you move together as one."

David agreed, "In the end, there's no substitute for face time. You don't have to have it always or often. But at least once a year I need a face-to-face with my counterpart, to keep that personal relationship. Travel is expensive, but it's worth going to Asia to have occasional meetings, so people know who you are. It's much easier to delete an e-mail if you don't know them."

In conclusion, e-mail is the technology of choice for virtual teams. The phone may be a more personal means of communication, but it is harder to use than e-mail for speakers of other languages. Videoconferences may work better

than a conference call for large groups. Clearly, face-to-face makes an effective communication channel that builds trust and confidence. Especially at the beginning of a project, teams can benefit from face-to-face meetings to establish relationships. Once they have reached baseline levels of understanding, they can use virtual communication more effectively later.

Team members can create an environment that encourages open communication and brainstorming. It's important to avoid blaming individuals for problems. Rather, team members should address problems together. As they share the responsibility and rewards of success, they can celebrate victories, even small ones, together.

The managers use a number of communication strategies to help them get their message across successfully with virtual teams. These include:

- Communicate continuously
- Use active listening
- Keep communication simple and clear
- Use different technologies to advantage
- Build relationships and trust
- Show respect for other cultures
- Be sensitive to cultural differences
- Check for understanding
- Ask for clarification

According to Daly (1996), effective communication in a multicultural team occurs when team members hear what was intended to be said. Establishing a working transnational team requires regular feedback, ongoing communication, active listening, and attention to what individuals and the group find acceptable and unacceptable (Iles and Hayers, 1997). David finds that continuous

communication is key to successful operations. That is why he exchanges daily e-mails with his network. At UPS, the director of international public relations has a weekly voice conference with his regional directors around the world.

Speaking the language and knowing the culture are definite advantages, but being sensitive to cultural differences is necessary for communication. Team members should be specific in their requests and never assume anything! To avoid misunderstandings, managers need to ask for clarification and check for understanding.

## **Conclusions**

The research on which this paper is based provides insight into strategies to facilitate virtual intercultural team communication in global corporations. Business communication faculty can incorporate these strategies into their instruction, for example, by designing projects for virtual intercultural teams. These projects can include oral or written reflection on the team communication process to help students learn as they experience the opportunities and challenges of communicating across cultures with technology.

By promoting understanding of the advantages of virtual intercultural teams, managers and business students can overcome many challenges posed by cross-cultural communication and technology. They can take advantage of the learning opportunities that derive from working with multicultural teams. With open minds and respect for other languages and cultures, business students and managers can help their teams avoid misunderstandings. Showing patience,

care, and sensitivity, managers can lead their teams across language and cultural barriers to more effective communication.

Understanding how to communicate effectively on virtual intercultural teams will help business students and managers achieve higher performance, and avoid costly delays in projects and decision-making. It will enhance appreciation for cultural diversity, and knowledge of technology's power to communicate across time and space while building strong human relationships.

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## **Figure 1**

### **Communicating through E-Commerce (Business Communication Class Project)**

#### **Assignment 5—Communicating with Intercultural Teams**

**Due Mar. 4**

In this project, you have worked with people from different cultures using technology to communicate. Comment on the following, and give specific examples.

What you learned about:

- 1) working on an intercultural team
- 2) dealing with cultural and language differences
- 3) communicating via e-mail, phone, or face-to-face (the pros and cons of each)
- 4) resolving communication problems
- 5) group writing and revision
- 6) the advantages of working with people from diverse backgrounds
- 7) time management

## Figure 2

### Managing Technology in Virtual Teams: Opportunities and Challenges

(Visual to support a lecture)

- Understand the advantages and limitations of technology
  - Know what it offers the company, employees, manager
  - Cross borders without leaving home
  - Balance distance work with face time
    - Understand the value of face-to-face meetings
  - Keep a balance between work and personal life
    - Avoid the temptation of working 24/7 with technology
- Understand the pros and cons of virtual teams
- Create positive attitudes toward technology
  - Understand resistance
  - Help teammates get used to the technology
  - Help them see what it offers
  - Offer training and technical support
- Build relationships with teammates via technology
  - Warm up a cold medium
  - Make it personal
  - Get to know each other with photos, celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, engagements, children
  - Build relationships with people you haven't met
  - Keep the human touch

### **Figure 3**

## **Communicating across Languages and Cultures: Opportunities and**

### **Challenges**

#### **(Visual to support a lecture)**

- Develop a network of relationships
- Understand how diversity strengthens a team
  - Understand pros and cons of intercultural teams
- Build trust and understanding
- Be open to learning about other cultures
  - Understand cultural values and beliefs, communication styles
  - Understand approaches to decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution
- Balance distance work with face-to-face time
- Show respect for other cultures and languages
  - Overcome cultural differences
  - Break down language barriers
- Use appropriate communication channels
- Check for understanding

## Figure 4

### Communication Strategies for Virtual Teams

(Visual to support a lecture)

- Choose the right communication channel to achieve your purpose
  - Know the strengths, limitations, and challenges of communicating via
    - E-mail
    - Phone
    - Fax
    - Videoconference
    - Face-to-face
- Encourage open communication, brainstorming
- Avoid assignment of blame
- To share the responsibility and rewards of success
  - Address problems together
  - Focus on the team, rather than the individual
  - Celebrate small victories together
  - Use the power of the team. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

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