

Cultural difference across virtual teams

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Addressing cultural differences across virtual teams As a result of growing global competition, today's businesses are no longer confined by geographic borders. Globalization drives many businesses into emerging markets and low wage countries to take advantage of their intellectual capital, and lower cost of operation. These changes have given rise to the "virtual team"; a cross-cultural group of co-workers that span international borders and typically communicate by means of technology rather than face-to-face meetings. A recent study by the Garner Group, states that by the year 2008, 41 million corporate employees will work in a virtual workplace at least one day per week [4]. Teams geographically separated not only must work in separate time zones, but also overcome cultural norms and differences, which have been described as one of the major issues of project management when dealing with virtual teams [1]. In this paper we will look at the challenges of the virtual team communication across different cultures. Initially we will explore the communication problems associated with time differences and language barriers often magnified by the lack of face-to-face experience and cultural differences. Then we will move further to investigate cultural value differences between virtual team members, different power relationships and hierarchical arrangements, diverse communication styles and how are these enhanced in the virtual environments. " Culture is an all inclusive system of communication which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior. Culture is the sum of a way of life, including such things as expected behavior, beliefs, values, language, and living practices shared by members of a society" [2]. Team

members with cultural differences can have vastly different communication styles [3] as well as different ways to convey information. Often times these cultural differences, can lead to tension between virtual team members as well as make communication difficult. Without the recognition of cultural differences, and the variation in communication styles, virtual teams often do not perform to their full potential. In order to make cross-cultural communication more effective, each side must educate themselves about their teams' culture, and learn to adapt accordingly. Since communication in cross-cultural virtual teams often involve communication via email and conference calls team members also need to change the way they communicate with one another. Communication misunderstandings are the number one complaint amongst virtual team members [4]. The language barrier can play a significant role, especially in electronic communication. Misunderstood idioms and culture specific phrases might undermine good relationship or even break the team apart. Team members must be aware of these potentially problematic points and be very careful when communication across different cultures. A virtual workplace typically leaves a lasting trail in the form of emails and logs. Some of the comments normally lost and discounted during face-to-face communications might pose dangerous problems to the virtual team dynamics when overanalyzed. Another problem with electronic media is difficulty in expressing emotions. A dry email exchange might be greatly enhanced by a phone call or a conference call, to reiterate and articulate most important issues. Such follow up should greatly improve the understanding of the task that team is faced with. Another issue working in a virtual team is the difference in time

zones. A virtual team spread out globally across differing time zones makes group collaboration difficult at best. Technology allows team members to communicate via email, text message, and voice; however, a time that may be convenient for one group may not be ideal for another. This becomes more of an issue when working to resolve emergency issues that arise when working on large projects. One possible solution to the time zone availability problem, one that was recently adopted at my place of employment, is to have all groups within the virtual team decide on an when each group will be available in both 'normal' and emergency circumstances. If at all possible we will work to find at least an hour each day that all teams are available for video conference calls. Video conference calling allows members to communicate quickly about the issues at hand, ask questions, and see each other and in my opinion feel a little more involved in the team effort. If time zone differences do not permit virtual teams to collaborate by a video conference call, we work to find an hour of time where everyone can call a central conference calling service. This allows people to 'call-in' from home, after hours rather than having to stay at work to join in a video conference. In lieu of virtual face to face meetings, I believe that voice communication is often times more efficient and effective in articulating thoughts and ideas when dealing with virtual teams than emails or text messaging. Email is fast, convenient, and necessary, but often times is not as effective at delivering a concept or idea and can be burdensome at times when teams need to brainstorm to find a solution to a problem. These novel and convenient forms of communication might however create some other problems on the ground of cultural differences, especially in the early life of the virtual team. For

example if the person on the call is at home or driving the attendees at the conference can hear his young children in the background or some car noise. In some cultures it might be a good personal break, an interruption that may bring team members closer together, to have some non-work related conversation that would benefit better relationship. In other cultures however, it might be considered annoying, unprofessional and eventually might lead to deterioration of the team cohesiveness and in turn to lower efficiency. Corporations save money by globalizing projects into virtual teams across different labor pools. It is important for a portion of the savings to be reinvested into technology that allows these teams to communicate efficiently and effectively. Working in virtual teams poses many problems; some of which have difficult solutions. Lack of the technology needed to communicate effectively is a problem with an easy solution and should be addressed in the early stages of the formation of a virtual team. In addition, some of these savings must be spent on physically bringing the teams, or key members together for face to face meetings. Compensating for the lack of human interaction within the team by bringing members together can foster a sense of belonging, trust, as well as help bridge some cultural differences.

" A shared commitment still requires personal contact to make it real.

Paradoxically the more virtual an organization becomes the more its people needs to meet in person. The meetings however are different. They are more about process than task, more concerned that people get to know each other than they deliver." [5] Additionally, companies that use cross cultural virtual teams should spend time and money on cultural training of their employees. Many times the stereotypes and presumed qualities will provide for very

difficult climate in the virtual team and limit its effectiveness. The culture might be modeled as an iceberg [9], and only behavioral qualities and artifacts are visible. Upon these people very often are making assumptions about other cultures and creating stereotypes. Inner, hidden qualities include culture values, beliefs and norms and finally fundamental assumptions about the world that forms them. These qualities are very helpful in understanding other cultures and will help in cross cultural virtual team communication. That should result in much better understanding and effectiveness of the virtual team. Whether teams are brought together virtually, or in person, cultural differences between the two still exists. When bringing different cultures together three key areas should be explored:

- " Identifying the nature and implications of the national cultural differences within the team.
- Establish a basis for building understanding and awareness of cultural differences and how they can be managed
- Formulating a framework for developing a high performance team which takes into cultural differences and leverages the diversity present."

[6] The three topics above illustrate some of the key competencies required for successfully operating in a cross-cultural virtual team. Identifying cultural differences: Identifying personal and professional cultural differences is the first step in identifying potential pitfalls with dealing with cross cultural virtual teams. For example, the company I work for is based in Austin Texas, and also has a design team in Bangalore India. As often as possible, we try to meet for face-to-face meetings and team building; one of the managers involved with a particular team building social outing decided to treat our guest to a Texas style barbeque not knowing that nearly eighty percent of our guests were Hindu, a

religion that practices vegetarianism as an ideal diet for spiritual progress [7]. Needless to say this did very little for building cohesion between the two teams as the Indian team watched the American team eat barbequed beef. Not only was it against their religion to eat meat, but most Hindu revere the killing of a cow as taboo [8]. In addition to obvious religious differences as in the example above, there are other important differences that need to be identified in a cross cultural team which might be more difficult to identify in the virtual team than in a face-to-face-meeting. LL Thompson [10] identified 3 dimensions of culture: individualism versus collectivism as referred to motivation of the culture, egalitarianism versus hierarchy as referred to influence and direct versus indirect communication as referred to information. Each of these can create additional problems in virtual team and we will take a look at each of them separately. Motivation in a culture is a very important driving factor in the team. When team members are coming from different cultures where some are more individualistic and others more collectivistic, caution needs to be given to prevent negative influences of each culture. In-group favoritism should be early identified as well as social loafing which might prove very difficult in the virtual team setting. Managers might have only limited personal control over parts of the team in the different parts of the world, and lack of face-to-face communication might additionally complicate team's supervision. Similarly the hierarchies need to be recognized in hierarchical cultures to improve sharing of information and team dynamics and to prevent unnecessary delays. Different cultures might also prefer different communication styles. While North American culture prefers very direct method of communication, a lot of the Far East cultures

are more indirect. Sometimes this indirectness might be taken as a negative attribute and cause lapses in communication destroying early relationships in a virtual team. Identifying these different communication styles might be additionally complicated due to the virtual nature of the team. Managing cultural differences: In addition to identifying cultural differences, management should make a concerted effort to understand cultural differences and strive toward building awareness in the virtual team. In my experience working in a virtual team, cultural differences are typically discovered after having worked together for a long period of time rather than identified and addressed in the beginning of the project. One of the most recent examples of managing cultural differences is with working with our India Design Center on one of our latest microprocessor designs. In our India group titles play an important role and create a perception of social groups that can only communicate with one another if they carry the same title. For example, if an American senior design engineer makes a mistake in the design that is discovered by a junior level engineer in India, then that junior level engineer will communicate this up the "chain of command" until it reaches a level equivalent to the senior level American engineer. Afterwards the Indian senior level engineer will call the American senior level engineer and discuss the problem in the design. Often times this can take several days to make its way up the hierarchy before the mistake is brought to the American engineers' attention. I believe this may be an issue of respect for the American engineer; however prolonging the reporting of problems in the design end up prolonging the project. After this cultural difference was recognized, it was discussed on one of our conference calls in detail, and we

assured our counterparts in India that we would not be offended, but rather appreciate any engineer, at any level reporting problems they find with the design back to us as soon as possible and we all make mistakes and do not take it personally if a junior engineer is the one who points it out. This example lends itself to the classic problem of hierarchical and egalitarian culture. The Indian culture is more hierarchical, in that a message has to traverse the whole "chain of command" before getting to the American engineer who works in egalitarian environment. This kind of communication problem is additionally magnified in the virtual team where email communication between different time zones might take days. It is the managers' responsibility to prevent these delays and make sure of the efficiency and cohesiveness of the team. When the virtual team members come from different cultures, another problem that needs to be managed is different motivational behaviors of team members. If team members are coming from the collectivistic or individualistic cultures, they must be evaluated on how they fit in the team. Many individualistic cultures might display problems of social loafing especially when working with team members coming from collectivistic cultures. Social loafing must be identified early and properly managed. Other frequent problem is the in-group favoritism often displayed by collectivistic cultures, which might alienate the virtual team completely. Virtual teams are bound by communications; therefore one of the most important factors in the virtual team is the clear communication of goals and expectations across the entire team. This might be difficult when the team is composed of team members from cultures that prefer different methods of communication. When some of

the team members are very direct others might use indirect methods to communicate their needs. Competent managers need to be able to identify and accommodate both of these methods and be able to send his or her message across both types without causing negative effects in the team. The skill to accommodate both styles of communication will be especially useful in resolving conflicts between the team members, where different cultures will have different ways of communicating their points across for resolution.

Leveraging Diversity: I believe that companies can have even greater success from a culturally diverse workforce by fostering the diversity of ideas rather than enforcing conformity. One implication of doing so is that the team becomes less standardized, and determinant and more fluid, allowing the team to adapt fast to changing situations. In addition, fostering this diversity can create new and innovative ideas as well as unique solutions and opportunities for the group to grow stronger and become more efficient problem solvers. Virtual team members from different cultures may greatly improve efficiency of the team if the best traits are brought and the team is managed properly. Skillful manager might bring up the best values from each culture to benefit the whole group, while minimizing negative effects. For example, the collectivistic cultures might greatly improve the team efficiency by improving cooperation; however, individualistic approaches should not be discounted as they might provide better direction and unorthodox but beneficial ideas that otherwise might have been lost. Cross cultural virtual team must overcome many challenges to become efficient and effective group in today's world. Starting with the time differences and language barriers and ending with deep cultural issues special care must be

taken to help bring the team together. Companies must invest into advanced means of communication as well as education of the team members to help overcome these issues. A lot of differences are based on the different cultural values, collectivism against individualism, egalitarianism versus hierarchy, or direct versus indirect forms of communication. Managers must be able to identify these issues before they create problems and then effectively managed these problems to make the virtual team effective. Furthermore skillful and culturally educated managers need to be able to leverage the cultural differences to improve the team effectiveness and increase its performance. References: [1] B. Egginton, Cultural Complexity and improvement performance of large international projects, in Proc. Engineering Management Conf. IEEE Int., India 1993, pp. 53 58 [2] The Innovation Matrix: Cultural and Structure Prerequisites to Innovation Herbig, Paul A 1994 [3] L. Dub and G. Par , Global Virtual Teams, Communication ACM, vol. 44 no. 12, pp. 71-73, 2001 [4] WikiPedia, www.wikipedia.com, "Virtual Teams". [5] Handy, C. (1995) Trust and the virtual organization. Harvard Business Review 73 pp. 40-49 [6] Malcolm Higgs, Towers Perrin, Overcoming the problems of cultural differences to establish success for international management teams [7] WikiPedia, www.wikipedia.com, "Vegeteriansim". [8] Rohit Arya: Why is the cow sacred? http://www.beliefnet.com/story/82/story_8229_1.html [9] Class notes November 11th [10] Leigh L Thompson, The Mind and Heart of the Negotiator., Pearson Education Inc., 2005