

Is More Technology Better for Communication in International Virtual Teams?

Cleber Marchetti Duranti, University of São Paulo, Brazil

Fernando Carvalho de Almeida, University of São Paulo, Brazil

ABSTRACT

With the advent of the collaboration tools based on ICT (Information and Communication Technology), the distances between the team members of a company spread around the world have shrunk, at least virtually. Using the most complete collaboration/communication technologies for project meetings, although beneficial at first glance, is not always the best choice when one considers the diverse cultural aspects of the team members of different nationalities. This article examines the adequacy of the communication tools for project communication in line with the cultural differences by comparing the views of American and Brazilian groups used to communicating through ICT on a daily basis for project related work. The results show significant differences between the perceptions and attitudes of the two groups regarding the adequacy of the communication tools in addressing usual project tasks.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, E-Collaboration, Global Projects, Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION

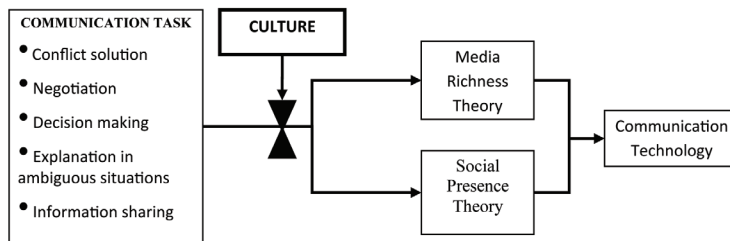
Current corporate reality demands that companies cooperate across national boundaries (Pick, Romano, & Nicholas, 2008) and many projects are being developed around the world through cooperative activities of people without being in face-to-face contact. This type of activity aims at availing of the competitive advantages being offered by the involved countries in reducing the cost of human resource deployment in countries

at different development levels (Daga & Kaka, 2006) and specializations.

This research analyzes the interaction between cultural traces and communication in global virtual projects which rely on ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools as the primary communication media, specifically the relation between cultural dimensions like “individualism/ collectivism”, “power distance”, “uncertainty avoidance” (Hofstede, 2005) and “cultural context in communication” (Hall, 1976) and perception of the fit of different ICT tools such as e-mail, chat and teleconference (audio and video), which

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Figure 1. Schematic sketch of how culture influences the fit between communication technology and communication task



reflect different technology features, to the project's communication needs.

The sketch (Figure 1) illustrates that the fit between communication technologies and different communication tasks can be weighed by the culture.

Global Projects and Cultural Aspects

For Cleland and Ireland (2000), global or international projects are those that go beyond national borders, cross one or more international borders, and can be led by an organization or a partnership. Differences in terms of culture, time zone, language and currency characterize these projects.

These differences may increase the possibility of misunderstanding, and particularly the communication barrier caused by the difference in language may offset the advantage of different perspectives of the team members toward a given subject (Combs & Peacocke, 2007). According to Schill et al. (1994), the main challenge for the management of global technology projects is usually not the technology management, but the management of people and of inter-organizational dynamics. They further consider that managing the attitudes, perceptions, and commitment of people is the most critical task. These tasks depend on the communication between the project manager and the team members. According to Rao (2004), managers must be able to adapt their managerial style to incorporate cultural differences.

Krishna et al. (2004) studied how American, Japanese and east European companies interact with Indian software development companies, and observed that different societies adopted different communication approaches. Indian companies, for example, when dealing with American customers, insist on written agreements and explicit documentation, backed by informal contacts through telephone and e-mail. On the other hand, when dealing with the Japanese companies, the agreements are more tacit, preferably verbal, involving more formal, but infrequent, use of e-mail. Another cultural aspect that emerged from this study was the attitude related to authority. In a project for an English customer, the Indian programmers used to avoid criticism in face-to-face meetings. Instead, they preferred to convey their opinion by e-mail later. This frustrated the English project managers who are used to close interaction in meetings for development of ideas.

In some cultures, for example the Japanese, it is not considered polite to step into a conversation during a meeting without being explicitly invited to participate. On the other hand, if the team members are not invited to express their opinion, they have the right to disagree with what was decided in the meeting (Anawati & Craig, 2006). Also, according to Anawati and Craig (2006), not all cultures favor open discussions, and in such cases, combining conference meetings with one-to-one phone talks can ensure that people of different cultures are involved in the discussions.

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