

# Leadership Constraints: Leading Global Virtual Teams Through Environmental Complexity

*Leslie C. Tworoger, H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA*

*Cynthia P. Ruppel, H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA*

*Baiyun Gong, H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA*

*Randolph A. Pohlman, H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA*

---

## ABSTRACT

*This research focused on the question: What leadership constraints contribute to the complexity of the working environment faced by global virtual team leaders and how do those leadership constraints impact the behavior of leaders when they are trying to meet team member expectations? This qualitative study of a high performing team within a multinational corporation (MNC) identified four constraints facing leaders: virtuality, globalization, the domestic workplace, and the matrix organizational structure. These constraints and their interactions contributed to the complexity that leaders faced when attempting to influence followers. While work/life roles have changed dramatically for leaders, team member expectations remain rooted in the past.*

*Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication, Constraints, Global Virtual Team, Leadership, Telework*

---

## INTRODUCTION

Companies are moving an increasing amount of work to globally dispersed teams in an effort to enhance their operations. These virtual teams (VTs) are often spatially or geographically dispersed work arrangements that are generally characterized by a relatively short lifespan, technology enhanced communications, and a dearth of face-to-face (FTF) interaction. The global

nature of many of these teams means that the leader is coping with temporal considerations and language and national cultural differences. In addition, computer-mediated communication (CMC) leaves the leader few traditional means to establish relationships, and tight time lines for project completion. This means that the leader has to focus on project goal achievement and task completion, often at the expense of building strong personal ties with the team members.

DOI: 10.4018/jec.2013040102

Additionally, many of the global multinational corporations (MNCs) are matrix organizational structures in which team members may have multiple bosses and may be assigned to two or more projects. Finally, as in this study, home-based global managers with no corporate offices are juggling their organizational duties while attempting to balance their work and life roles, making leading in the global virtual environment increasingly complex.

Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) specified that “the more teams rely on virtual tools to work and communicate as opposed to face-to-face interaction, the higher the level of virtuality” (p. 703). “The more virtual a team becomes, the more complex are the issues it must address to function effectively” (Zigurs, 2003, p. 339). Even though virtualization has removed temporal and spatial boundaries, it has created a continuum of boundaries that face VTs (Zigurs, 2003; Breu & Hemingway, 2004). “In just a short time, most businesses have gone from complicated to complex: They contain numerous diverse, interdependent parts. This makes managers’ jobs much more difficult” (Sargut & McGrath, 2011, p. 71). Therefore, identifying and exploring the impact of complexity while leading in the global virtual environment requires further investigation and will be examined in this paper. This study will respond to the challenge set forth by Fairholm (1998) by exploring “a new kind of leadership reality” (p. 192) for the “new millennium” (p. 191). The subject team represents some of the dynamic changes identified by Thite (1999), including working from an office located in the home where “the traditional leadership models have little relevance” (p. 259).

This research study investigates leadership in a global VT within a Fortune 100 MNC known for its high performance oriented culture. The U. S. managers of the team were leading through all of the environmental complexity outlined above which included global team members who were located in, and native to,

India. There had been no FTF interaction during the life of the project as the work of the team was conducted virtually mainly with CMC. The project was accomplished while working within the MNC’s matrix organizational structure, with team members being part of multiple projects with multiple managers making demands on their time. In addition, the U.S. managers no longer had corporate offices and were working from the “domestic workplace,” which included their home offices or any other location made necessary by their work and life roles. The value of the data is enhanced by the fact that we had the opportunity to interview and observe multiple leadership levels of the team. The subjects included in the study were the five U. S. based managers, among them the executive level manager and the top operational project manager. In addition, the study included project team members from India. This team, the managers and the members from India, had been working together on this project for months and had never met FTF prior to the meeting that we observed at one of the U.S. regional headquarters. The purpose of the meeting was to close out their successful project for which the team members and the top operational project manager were given companywide recognition. This research focuses on answering the question of what are the hurdles leaders face when leading a global VT. Additionally, it is beneficial to examine the expectations team members have of their leaders in a global VT when the leaders must negotiate environmental complexity.

This research is important because it is a field study of a natural team within an MNC with both the leaders and their subordinates were interviewed and observed. Many previous studies of VTs and virtual leaders were experiments conducted with students (Munkovold, 2005). Furthermore, field studies that examine VT leader behaviors at a more fine grained level are called for to better define the role of the team leader in the virtual environment (Hambley, O’Neill, & Kline, 2007b).

25 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/article/leadership-constraints-leading-global-virtual/77845?camid=4v1](http://www.igi-global.com/article/leadership-constraints-leading-global-virtual/77845?camid=4v1)

This title is available in InfoSci-Journals, InfoSci-Journal Disciplines Communications and Social Science, InfoSci-Select, InfoSci-Select, InfoSci-Communications, Online Engagement, and Media eJournal Collection, InfoSci-Journal Disciplines Business, Administration, and Management.

Recommend this product to your librarian:

[www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=2](http://www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=2)

## Related Content

---

### Investigating IOS Adoption Maturity Using a Dyadic Approach

Mazen Ali, Sherah Kurnia and Robert B. Johnston (2009). *International Journal of e-Collaboration* (pp. 43-60).

[www.igi-global.com/article/investigating-ios-adoption-maturity-using/1990?camid=4v1a](http://www.igi-global.com/article/investigating-ios-adoption-maturity-using/1990?camid=4v1a)

### Virtual Reality and Identity Crisis—: Implications for Individuals and Organizations

Archana Tyagi (2011). *Business Organizations and Collaborative Web: Practices, Strategies and Patterns* (pp. 202-218).

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/virtual-reality-identity-crisis/54056?camid=4v1a](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/virtual-reality-identity-crisis/54056?camid=4v1a)

## A Semantic Web Based Approach for Context-Aware User Query Formulation and Information Retrieval

Hanh Huu Hoang, Tho Manh Nguyen and A Min Tjoa (2009). *Collaborative and Social Information Retrieval and Access: Techniques for Improved User Modeling* (pp. 313-336).

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/semantic-web-based-approach-context/6648?camid=4v1a](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/semantic-web-based-approach-context/6648?camid=4v1a)

## E-Collaboration Tools and Technologies for Creativity and Innovation Enhancement

Jane Fedorowicz, Isidro Laso-Ballesteros and Antonio Padilla-Meléndez (2010). *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on E-Collaboration: Emerging Trends and Applications* (pp. 130-141).

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/collaboration-tools-technologies-creativity-innovation/41547?camid=4v1a](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/collaboration-tools-technologies-creativity-innovation/41547?camid=4v1a)