Click-Link-In Sync: Communication Patterns of Multinational Virtual Learning Teams

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was: (a) to explore the dynamic nature of communication patterns in multinational VLTs; (b) to understand the role in team outcomes (performance and overall satisfaction with the project); and (c) to generate recommendations for successful integration of VLTs into apparel curricula.

Keywords
multinational, virtual teams, communication, group dynamics

Disciplines
Business and Corporate Communications | Fashion Business | International Business | Organizational Behavior and Theory

Comments
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Apparel is produced through extensive production networks around the globe (Aspers & Skov, 2006), necessitating interface and collaboration between professionals over organizational and geographical boundaries (Hertel, et al., 2005). Globalization, stern competition and advances in information technology are fundamentally redefining these networks (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999). Kim and Johnson (2009) stress that a collaborated team based approach throughout the supply chain will be a future trend, which has major implications for training and educating professionals. Developing apparel curricula to prepare students for virtual teamwork and collaboration in computer mediated environments is of particular interest to educators training future workforce for this complex and globalized industry. Due to the increasing use of information technologies for teaching and learning, educational practices have now expanded beyond time-and-place (Bonk, 2009). Virtual learning teams (VLT) face greater challenges in areas such as effective communication, cultural differences, and technology (Kayworth & Leider, 2000). The absence of face-to-face interaction and distance in time and space make it difficult to evaluate and share information (Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002). The increasing use of VLT in higher education requires further understanding of virtual group dynamics (Karpova, Correia, & Baran, 2009). The purpose of this study was: (a) to explore the dynamic nature of communication patterns in multinational VLTs; (b) to understand the role in team outcomes (performance and overall satisfaction with the project); and (c) to generate recommendations for successful integration of VLTs into apparel curricula.

An exploratory case study was conducted of a multinational VLT project, Going Global, which extended over a one month period. Eighteen, multinational VLTs were created, each composed of 7-8 apparel students from three universities located in the United States, South Africa, and Australia. A total of 136 undergraduate students enrolled in either sourcing/global operations or fashion merchandising courses participated in the project, which consisted of three learning modules and journaling activity for reflecting on the project progress and outcomes. The project utilized course management system (CMS), such as WebCT or Blackboard. For the first module, each student posted a personal introduction. The intention was for team members to get to know each other. The second module focused on student individual values and negotiated collective team values. The last module was a role play activity about labor conditions in the apparel industry. Students had to do a research and prepare a statement based on an assigned role. After sharing the statements, team members discussed them in CMS via threaded discussion in a personal space created for every team. In addition to posting reflections throughout the project, students were expected to submit a final reflection using a series of questions developed by the instructors. Students’ journals were private and only the instructors were able to access it.
Student reflections were compiled together and used for analyses and interpretation. The teams were highly diverse in terms of nationality, culture, technical competencies, infrastructure, and access to resources. This provided a realistic setting to study group interaction and communication patterns of the VLTs.

Data were coded according to categories related to communication and team outcomes. The results showed that virtual learning teams can successfully work together to accomplish certain assigned tasks. Communication patterns seem to present some challenges to team members such as delayed response/feedback from team members due to different time zones as well as frustration with limitation of the communication medium. The level of satisfaction with the project outcomes was related to the communication patterns in the VLT. Students showed a higher degree of performance and overall satisfaction when the general participation, contribution and involvement (frequent responses) of all team members were equal. Students stated that they would prefer the project to last longer so that they could have more time to get to know each other, which would have made communication more effective and project outcomes—more substantial and of higher quality. The following recommendations for implementing virtual learning teams can be made: students in VLTs should be informed or made aware of cross-cultural communication challenges. Quick response and clear feedback to team members to overcome misunderstandings and improve team performance are recommended. The personal introduction module was very effective for establishing team rapport and providing a foundation for future team communication pattern. The time-line of the course should be taken into account. Longer duration of this project could benefit socio-emotional communication between group members. Limited engagement and involvement with other team members due to the short time duration of the project was mentioned by students. This study analyzed student communication patterns in an innovative project that involved VLTs and brought together undergraduate apparel students from three countries.

References: