



When distance is good: A construal level perspective on perceptions of inclusive international language use



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ABSTRACT

Virtual work has become an increasingly important part of the international business environment. In particular, two components of virtual work; workplace mobility and distributed work, depicting physical and psychological distance to the workplace, have gained substantial scholarly attention. However, while the main stream of the international business literature, studying global virtual teams, has used mobility and distribution as predictors for negative work outcomes, there are indications that virtual work can have positive implications for the organization. In this study, we explore how workplace mobility and distributed work can affect employees' perceptions of their colleagues and of managerial activities. More specifically, we focus on inclusive language use by managers and employees since this is a theme of growing interest in international business research. Relying on responses from 676 individuals from five Danish multicultural business organizations, we demonstrate a positive association between workplace mobility and perceptions of employees' openness to language diversity as well as between distributed work and perceptions of consistent common corporate language at management level. This is consistent with construal level theory predicting that distance between employees and the organization will lead to more objective and goal-oriented perceptions whereas individuals that are more emerged in organizational social life will view issues more in relation to goal irrelevant factors.

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1. Introduction

Virtual work is becoming an increasingly important part of doing business internationally (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015; Sidhu & Volberda, 2011). Consequently, a stream of literature has been concerned with management issues related to technology mediated collaboration between geographically remote employees (Fiol & O'Conner, 2005; Henderson, 2008; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). In particular, studies on global virtual teams have added important insights to our understanding of possibilities and pitfalls of international virtual work (Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp, & Gilson, 2012; Maznevski, Davison, & Jonsen, 2006; Oshri, van Fenema, & Kotlarsky, 2008). Thus, virtual collaboration allows the MNC to tap into geographical distributed resource pools and offers a cost reductive and sustainable alternative to face-to-face collaboration

(Au & Marks, 2012; Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013). Yet, virtuality also poses a range of challenges for global teams (Scott & Wildman, 2015). The lack of physical face-to-face interaction within the organization combined with coordination challenges related to communication across spatial and temporal boundaries negatively impacts virtual collaboration (Mockaitis, Rose, & Zettenig, 2012; Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012). Therefore, international business researchers have become increasingly interested in how different dimensions of virtuality affect virtual work, and in particular two aspects of virtuality have drawn considerable attention: workplace mobility and distributed work (Chudoba, Wynn, Lu, & Watson-Manheim, 2005; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010; Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter, & Levitt, 2004). Workplace mobility refers to the degree to which employees work in environments other than their regular office, and distributed work represents the degree to which individuals rely on basic communication technologies to work with people that are distributed over different geographies and time zones (Chudoba et al., 2005). Thus, the combination of the two dimensions provides an understanding of how distant individuals are affiliated to their organization with regard to physical and psychological presence.

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Virtual teams are groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunication and information technologies to accomplish a variety of critical tasks (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). Thus, central to existing conceptualizations of virtuality is the geographical separation between team members and their reliance on information and communication technology (Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Gilson et al., 2015). Studies have consistently found a strong correlation between the degree of virtuality and team outcomes (Gilson et al., 2015; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010). Thus, geographical distance combined with a reliance on communication technology has proven to reduce trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), increase task conflict (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001), intensify coordination problems (Cramton, 2001), decrease performance (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), and limit extra-role behavior (Ganesh & Gupta, 2010). More specifically, workplace mobility has been shown to have negative influences on communication, commitment, and performance (Chudoba et al., 2005), while distributed work has been argued to lead to uncertainty, isolation, and reduced performance (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). Although the bulk of literature has, thus, focused on the negative consequences of these central dimensions of virtual work, studies indicating positive aspects of virtuality have also emerged. Hence, virtual work has been connected to greater flexibility (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998), reduced stress (Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004), improved individual creativity, and increased positive perceptions of managers competence, and team member satisfaction (Henderson, 2008; Jia, Hirt, & Karpen, 2009; Wilson, Crisp, & Mortensen, 2013).

In accordance with this emerging stream of research, which seeks to counterbalance the predominantly negative view on virtual collaboration, we set out to explore positive aspects of workplace mobility and distributed work. We do this by basing our research on construal level theory (Henderson, Waksak, Fujita, & Rohrbach, 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2010) arguing that being distant from something can make one evaluate it more positively. The aim with using construal level theory in an international business setting is two-fold. *First*, the theory allows us to address recent calls for more studies that explore the potential positive effects of distance on central aspects of international business and management (Ambos & Håkanson, 2014). *Second*, while construal level theory provides an alternate explanation of potential positive outcomes in distributed work, no efforts have been expanded to use it to empirically understand international virtual work (Wilson et al., 2013). Also, we specifically focus on how working virtually can affect individuals' perceptions of their surroundings. Thus, so far little has been done to gain an understanding of how working virtually affects employees' subjective perceptions of collaboration and management in international organizations. This is problematic since employees' perceptions could be as important to understand as the actual functioning of organizations (Hobman, Bodia, & Gallois, 2004). This is because individuals are guided by their perception rather than by objective facts and thus take decisions based on how they see things rather than on how things are – especially when things are at a distance. Therefore it can be argued that perceptions are highly important to include in theory building in the field of international business in general and for virtual teams in particular. Not least because results of management policies and practices are subjectively formed in the minds of organizational members (Hambrick, 2007).

Accordingly, we follow the notion that different individuals who are situated differently in relation to the organization (more or less away from the actual setting) may also perceive the role and functioning of management initiatives differently (Henderson, 2008). In doing so, we aim to add knowledge to the international business literature on global virtual teams where a void exists concerning factors affecting team members' identification with

and evaluation of the organization (Cramton & Hinds, 2014; Mukherjee & Hanlon, 2012).

Here, we focus on the perception of inclusive language use which is the inclusion of all organization members in communication despite their linguistic origin. We choose to focus on language management because this is increasingly acknowledged as an important field in international business research (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014; Volk, Köhler, & Pudelko, 2014). The present study of virtual work's effect on perceptions on organizational language use is important for several reasons. *First*, studies on the potential positive aspects of virtual work are still scarce (Henderson, 2008). Hence, despite that conceptual articles have called for an understanding of how working virtually affects perceptions of organizations and their members, little has been done to empirically explore this field (Wilson et al., 2013; Wilson, O'Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008). *Second*, language and language management is still a developing theme in international business (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014; Lopez-Duarte & Vidal-Suarez, 2010). Thus, Piekkari and Tietze (2011) maintain that there is yet little common thrust in developing research agendas on linguistic issues. Similar notions are put forward in a large number of recent articles that call for more research on the topic (e.g. Björkman & Piekkari, 2009; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Zander, Mockaitis, & Harzing, 2011). Finally, while the connection of language management to virtual work is a highly important theme, very few studies have combined the two fields (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Peltokorpi, 2015; Zander et al., 2012).

The remainder of this paper will commence with a literature review of the conceptual parts of this investigation: Virtual work (including workplace mobility and distributed work) and perceived inclusive language use (including management's use of common language and employees' openness to language diversity). This conceptual framework is succeeded by a description of the theoretical foundation and the generation of hypotheses to be tested. The methods section delineates the target group, sample and measures applied. Results are displayed and subsequently discussed in terms of main findings, limitations and implications. Finally, the conclusions of this study are drawn.

2. Conceptualization

2.1. Virtual work and distance

A universal assumption underlying the term 'virtual' is distance (Chudoba et al., 2005). The distance concept has become central in business and management research as the physical void between individuals during social interactions has grown dramatically with access to the internet and mobile telecommunication (Henderson, 2009; Quelch & Jocz, 2012).

In general, distance can be said to relate to similarity or difference in regard to the degree of separation between two points. However, in international business research, distance is not theorized solely as a physical variable (Ahammad, Tarba, Liu, & Glaister, 2015; Godinez & Liu, 2015). With the psychic distance concept (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), distances have become related also to subjective orientation and perceptions of business partners, markets, and foreign units (Drogendijk & Martín, 2015; Nordman & Tolstoy, 2014). According to Evans and Mavondo (2002), the definition of psychic distance should include two central elements, namely a psychological and physical understanding of the separation of individuals (see also Blanc-Brude, Cookson, Piesse, & Strange, 2014). From this definition it becomes evident that it is not only the geographical factors which determine the degree of

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