



Interventions for effectively leading in a virtual setting

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Online education;
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Abstract At least a decade ago, researchers recognized the importance of leaders being able to effectively execute interventions in teams. Now, advances in collaboration technologies have changed the way teams work together in addition to the challenges they face with regard to technology and collaboration. Due to these changes, it is important to take a look at interventions and how they can be technology driven or administered. Advances in technology-driven interventions can have a substantial impact on virtual project management and online education. In this article, we explore the role of interventions in improving technology choice in a virtual setting. We argue that both proactive and reactive interventions can be used to address virtual team challenges when it comes to technology choice. We identify six interventions (proactive and reactive) that were used to lead seven global offshore development teams, as well as the findings from their use. We also advise managers and online educators on ways to effectively identify and use interventions in virtual settings.

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1. Interventions defined

Consider the following: A virtual team has been working together for a short time. The team leader begins to notice that work is not being completed, and team members are complaining about the collaboration technology they have been asked to use. These kinds of problems and complaints constitute a discrepant event that can be addressed with a reactive intervention. Therefore, the team leader proposes to the team members that they can either

switch technologies or develop some rules or guidelines for using the current technology. This proposal is presented online in the collaborative workspace where the virtual team members are laboring. Choosing to switch technologies, the team members become much more satisfied and start completing their work.

The foregoing vignette involves a virtual team leader using an intervention to address virtual team technology challenges. An *intervention* in this scenario is defined as an appropriate act at a key moment that results in situated learning. *Situated learning* is defined as learning by doing (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or learning that occurs during the

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process of work, as opposed to learning based on outside knowledge (Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000). This kind of intervention is different than training or facilitation due to the importance of context and the focus on ongoing learning.

Using interventions, team leaders are able to encourage learning in the virtual team environment in order to proactively and reactively address issues that may arise. Our goal is to illustrate how interventions can be applied in the virtual environment. We provide examples of interventions by describing a global offshore development project that we conducted in Huddle (www.huddle.net), in which six different interventions were applied. We also discuss opportunities and challenges for virtual team leaders and online educators interested in taking advantage of technology-delivered interventions.

2. The use of intervention

At least a decade ago, researchers recognized the importance of supporting dynamic change during group processes and called for research into how group leaders may sense the need for technology change and effectively execute interventions (Orlikowski, 1996; Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997). Since then, interventions have been used in groups to address organizational change (Weick & Quinn, 1999), to manage technology change (Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003), and to understand conflict management and improve knowledge (Thomas & Bostrom, 2010). These examples show that the use of interventions is, indeed, important and useful.

Today, advances in collaboration technologies have changed the way teams work together, as well as the challenges they face regarding technology and collaboration. Due to these changes, it is important to take a look at interventions and how they

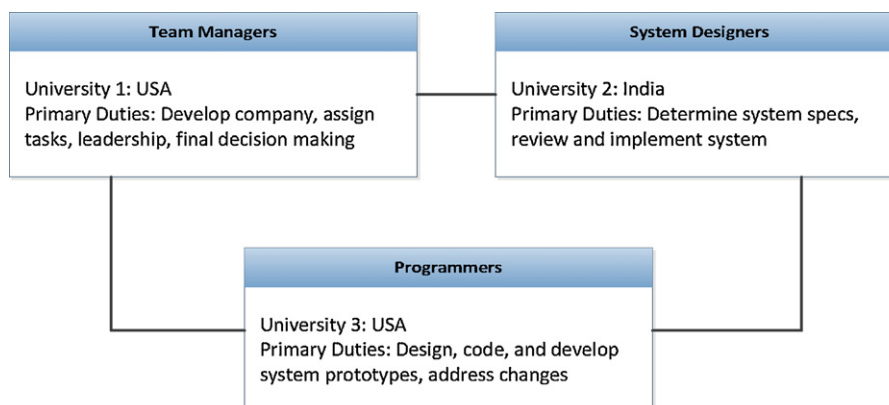
can be administered. Previous intervention use has shown that employing appropriate interventions benefits virtual teams (Thomas & Bostrom, 2010)—namely, teams made up of individuals who work together through the use of technology (Dubé & Paré, 2004; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). We further this finding by suggesting that an applied intervention can be either proactive or reactive to a discrepant event. *Proactive interventions* involve planning based on best practices and are put in place to teach virtual team members how to prevent certain challenges from arising. Similar to these leader-driven proactive interventions, proactive meeting assistants, or software agents, have been found to potentially aid in the meeting process (Rienks, Nijholt, & Barthelmess, 2009). *Reactive interventions*, like in the scenario presented above, address discrepant events that arise while team members are working together. Examples of discrepant events include team members voicing unhappiness when working with a technology or team members giving negative performance reviews (Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, King, & Ba, 2000). Reactive interventions promote ‘sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995) and provide the proponent of the intervention with justification for the intervention.

3. The study of interventions

To illustrate the possibilities of interventions, we conducted a longitudinal educational field study with student teams in different courses and locations working on a project over a significant portion of a semester. This type of field study allows for a non-experimental scientific inquiry to uncover interactions in real social structures (Kerlinger, 1986).

Altogether, seven teams were formed with students from three universities (see Figure 1). Students from the first university (in the United States)

Figure 1. Team/University relationships



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