The centrality of communication norm alignment, role clarity, and trust in global project teams

Linda S. Henderson [a,*], Richard W. Stackman [a], Rikke Lindekilde [b]

[a] *Department of Organization, Leadership and Communication, School of Management, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA*
[b] *Aarhus University, Department of Management, Center for Leadership, Folke Bernadottes Alle 45, 2100 Kobenhavn Ø, Denmark*

Abstract

Research has confirmed the criticality of communication norms, role clarity and trust to the workings of global virtual teams. However, the relationship among these three variables remains unclear. In this study, based on findings from a survey of 218 global project workers representing 33 distinct project teams, we demonstrate the significance of role clarity and trust to individuals' project satisfaction and role clarity to individuals' project performance. We further uncover how global project team (GPT) members' satisfaction and/or performance are affected by where the GPT members are located and whether GPT members are co-located with their project manager. These findings are complemented by 18 in-person interviews with GPT members, which show how one must simultaneously establish and maintain role clarity for oneself while consistently negotiating role clarity with others also participating on global project teams. We conclude this study by outlining an emerging model for creating and sustaining GPTs that benefits both researchers and practitioners.
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1. Introduction

Globalization has increased multinational organizations' reliance on global virtual teams (GVTs) to facilitate collaboration across dispersed employees and stakeholders (Zander et al., 2012). GVTs typically consist of interdependent groups of individuals who reside in different time zones and countries and who rely primarily on communication technology or media to accomplish a common goal (Horwitz et al., 2006; O'Leary and Cummings, 2007). Wherever they are located, GVTs allow specialists to work together, often reducing travel-related expense, time and stress (Orlikowski, 2002). However, these benefits can prove elusive to the communication interactions of GVTs when compared to co-located work groups (Lipnack and Stamps, 2000; Olson and Olson, 2000). Differences in geographical dispersion, available technology, time zones, national and organizational cultures, and work practices present problems for global virtual team members in establishing and maintaining norms of communication that transcend their differences and facilitate collaborative work efforts (Moser and Axtell, 2013). If they are to exist, communication norms among GVT members must be aligned in order to offset their reliance on communication technologies to facilitate their interactions and information exchange in cue-deprived environments (Cramton, 2001; Crisp and Jarvenpaa, 2013; Krumm et al., 2013). No research to date explicitly examines the alignment of communication norms among GVT members.

Many GVTs also represent temporary organizations in which members work on time-limited projects with specific scope objectives and transitional human resources. As Jacobsson et al.

(2015) explained, "Most temporary, focused, and organized endeavors can be regarded as a project and studied as a temporary organization" (p. 9). Recent research on temporary organizational configurations by Curnin et al. (2015) found that role clarity acts as a critical enabler in forming temporary organizations, such as global virtual projects, and maintaining their collaborative work practices. Role clarity refers to the extent to which individuals clearly understand the duties, tasks, objectives and expectations of their work roles (Hinkin and Schriesheim, 2008; Katz and Kahn, 1978). Organizational research has demonstrated that role clarity positively impacts both performance (Bolino and Turnley, 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Salamon and Deutsch, 2006) and satisfaction (Martins et al., 2004; Moynihan and Pandy, 2007). The requirement appears high for GVT members to understand their roles and effectively communicate their expectations and requirements (Wong et al., 2007). Yet little is known about how GVT members' role clarity interrelates with their communication norms especially in influencing important outcomes. What we do know is that through their communication behaviors and use of media, GVT members can create trust or swift trust that is necessary for clarifying their roles (Curnin et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2015; Malhotra et al., 2007). Indeed research has shown that trust is an important predictor of employees' overall adjustment to virtual work (Raghuram et al., 2001).

In the current study we examine the following research question: How do role clarity and trust function with the alignment of communication norms to influence global project team members' satisfaction and performance? We focus on global *project* team members since these types of teams "derive their distinctiveness from working horizontally across flat structures with different functional areas of expertise within matrix [configurations] at local and remote sites of organizations". As Daim et al. (2012) observed, "Globally disbursed project teams are now the new norm in every industry" (p. 201). To address our research question, we surveyed 218 GPT members representing 33 distinct virtual teams of a Northern European multi-national company (MNC). We also conducted 18 in-person interviews with GPT members at four global locations within this same company. The results from our mixed methods analyses reveal several relevant findings for both theory development and professional practice in global project management. Extending from these results, we envision the alignment of project communication norms, project role clarity and trust within an emerging contextual model for creating and sustaining GPTs. The emerging model supports the projects-as-practice framework, which advocates for the development of theory and practice emanating from studies of what employees actually do in projects (Blomquist et al., 2010).

2. Literature review

Communication norms represent a critical, but under-researched construct in the virtual work literature (Moser and Axtell, 2013). Norms for communication in virtual teams typically include expectations or agreed upon codes of conduct for behaviors such as initiating and responding to messages, sharing different types of information over different media, and prioritizing message importance for remote versus collocated partners (Cramton and Orvis, 2003). In the complex and dynamic environment of virtual work, especially in regard to global teams, difficulty can arise in getting communication norms to 'gel' unless a conscious effort is made to define them (DeSanctis and Monge, 1998). Norms also require time to emerge (Krumm et al., 2013). For example, in a longitudinal study of a distributed start-up company, Ghosh et al. (2004) found that communication norms emerged "slowly over time as people subtly and often tacitly adjusted and adapted their individual practices, preferences, and expectations to be more aligned with those of other team members or the group as a whole" (p. 125). Indeed this emergent nature of communication norms toward alignment on virtual teams stems in part from team members' dispersion, cultural diversity and differing expectations for communication and media (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007). Research by Cheshin et al. (2013) examined the emergent nature of differing electronic communication norms within partially distributed teams in a simulated setting. Remote participants had one media (email) and those collocated had two (email and face-to-face). Their results showed that partially distributed teams developed distinctive communication norms between collocated and remote team members, i.e., from being in a dual media environment, collocated members exerted more cognitive energy and elaboration in their communications with remotes.

Research has also shown that adherence to group norms may be less likely on culturally diverse teams (Krumm et al., 2013). Certain ways of communicating as well as the medium – whether it is by telephone, email or web-based video conferencing – can be acceptable in one cultural context, but unacceptable in another (Armstrong and Cole, 1995; Hertel et al., 2006). In a recent study of norms in cross-cultural teams, Krumm et al. (2013) found that virtual "team members need to embody KSAs [knowledge, skills and abilities] related to working *conscientiously* in order to counteract the challenges of cue deprivation" (p. 40). Technological media can amplify the cultural diversity of virtual team members making mutual understanding difficult in the heterogeneous context of global teams (Cramton, 2001) and, thus, restricting ongoing information about acceptable and unacceptable communication norms (Vignovic and Thompson, 2010). As a consequence, global communication can be challenging as virtual team members may act according to norms activated by other more immediate (i.e., local) contexts. One result is that members may perceive their colleagues working remotely as outgroup members (Tyler and Blader, 2003; Webster and Wong, 2008), a condition not uncommon in multi-national organizations who typically operate with both headquarters and remote virtual members. Hinds and Bailey (2003) argue that due to the aforementioned dynamics, conflicts about work processes such as communication are common in global, virtual teamwork. The result can be a negative effect on team member outcomes such as satisfaction and performance (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007). For example, in their study of global project teams in the banking industry, Lee-Kelley and Sankey (2008) found that members reported dissatisfaction when email and conference call communication norms were insufficient.