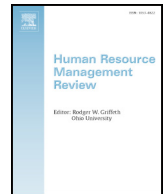


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Communication in virtual teams: a conceptual framework and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

As virtual teams are becoming more frequently implemented within organizations, research examining the effect of virtual tool use on team functioning has correspondingly expanded. One primary focus of this literature is the impact of virtuality on team communication. However, findings remained mixed. Specifically, the impact of virtuality on the mechanisms between communication and performance as well as the simultaneous moderating effect of contextual factors on this relationship remains to be fully examined. One reason for this lack of clarity stems from ambiguity regarding the elements that constitute communication. To address this gap, this paper delineates which aspects of communication are most influential and should, consequently, be the primary focus of future research efforts. An overarching framework of the communication process with accompanying research propositions is also described to inform future research and the practice of virtual teams.

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1. Introduction

To remain competitive and contend with increasingly demanding cognitive tasks (Ilgen, 1994), organizations implement teams across a diverse range of fields (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999). As teams have become more prevalent within organizations, research examining contributors to team effectiveness has grown at a rapid rate. Communication is a team process that is consistently identified as enhancing team performance, as it facilitates the development of integral team processes and outcomes in a fashion distinct from other pertinent team variables (e.g., Espevik, Johnsen, Eid, & Thayer, 2006; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Consequently, the relationship between team communication and performance has been frequently assessed within the literature (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005).

However, as teams research has grown rapidly, disparate streams of research assessing these relationships have emerged that have yet to be linked. Team communication is often conceptualized and defined in different manners (Stout, Cannon-Bowers, & Salas, 1994); however, team communication studies are frequently discussed in tandem with other studies, despite measuring communication in different ways. This contributes to inconsistent findings and a less nuanced understanding of this construct and its relationship with team performance. The strength of the relationship between information sharing and performance has been demonstrated to be contingent upon how information sharing is defined (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009); we suggest it is similarly necessary to distinguish between different forms of communication, a broader, related construct which subsumes information sharing. More specifically, it is necessary to delineate which features of communication are integral to team functioning and thus should serve as the primary focus of most research.

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Another problem plaguing this literature is the emergence of new challenges which alter the way teams communicate. Recent advances in technological capabilities that have facilitated communication across distance and time have allowed organizations to more frequently utilize virtual teams (Leonard, 2011; Lepsinger, 2011). Paralleling the increasing prevalence of virtual teams, the effect of virtuality on team communication has received a high focus in the literature, as one intrinsic difference between virtual teams and traditional, collocated teams is the method of communication (Hertel et al., 2005). Specifically, highly virtual teams communicate primarily via virtual tools (e.g., e-mail, instant messaging; Gibson & Cohen, 2003). This has been argued to be detrimental to various team outcomes and early studies in this area generally sought to confirm this; however, more recent studies have begun to indicate that this relationship may be more complex than initially postulated (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, Jimenez-Rodriguez, Wildman, & Shuffler, 2011). Consequently, there is a need to bridge older studies with the newer body of literature, and utilize relevant theory to explain any discrepancies between findings. To address these identified gaps, we integrate the present literature by organizing it around an overarching framework intended to inform future research.

2. A conceptual framework of communication in virtual teams

The proposed conceptual model (Fig. 1) is predicated upon the input–mediator–output–input framework (IMOI) described by Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, and Jundt (2005), in which we conceptualize communication as a team process. The IMOI model extends the input–process–output (IPO) model (Hackman, 1987; McGrath, 1984; Steiner, 1972) by accounting for interactions among inputs and processes or other aspects of the model as such relationships have been extensively documented in salient research (e.g., Colquitt, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, LePine, & Sheppard, 2002). In the following section, we describe each element of the framework, beginning by discussing the communication component. Specifically, we review the literature in the area of virtual teams and identify the most significant elements of communication. Accompanying the description of this framework are relevant propositions.

2.1. Team communication: unpacking the black box

One of the defining features of virtual teams is that communication primarily occurs through virtual tools (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Consequently, researchers have sought to quantify the effect that this has on team processes and outcomes. One common finding is that virtual teams take longer to complete tasks (e.g., Graetz, Boyle, Kimble, Thompson, & Garloch, 1998; Hollingshead, 1996; Straus, 1996). Researchers note that this stems from a variety of issues, such as the time delay associated with utilizing virtual tools and the asynchronous nature of some virtual tools (Malhotra, Majchrzak, Carman, & Lott, 2001). A potential issue within this area of study is inconsistent and inconclusive findings. For example, research assessing communication content, rather than communication volume, has produced mixed findings. Hiltz, Johnson, and Turoff (1986) found that virtual teams generally focused more on exchanging task-oriented communication than face-to-face teams. Conversely, Bordia, Difonzo, and Chang (1999) demonstrated that communication content was not different, in terms of task focus, between virtual and face-to-face teams. However, Bordia et al. (1999) note that their findings are “suggestive” (p. 26), rather than conclusive, as they did not include a formal comparison between computer mediated groups and face-to-face groups.

Martins, Gilson, and Maynard (2004) suggested that one reason for inconsistent findings pertaining to virtual teams is the manner in which virtuality is conceptualized. Initially, researchers often conceptualized virtuality as a categorical variable, with teams classified as either virtual or face-to-face (e.g., Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). Martins et al. (2004) noted that, as initial studies primarily took place in laboratory settings with student participants, this was appropriate but, as focus has since shifted to familiar teams in organizational settings, more suitable conceptualizations of virtuality have begun to be adapted. Specifically, researchers have since

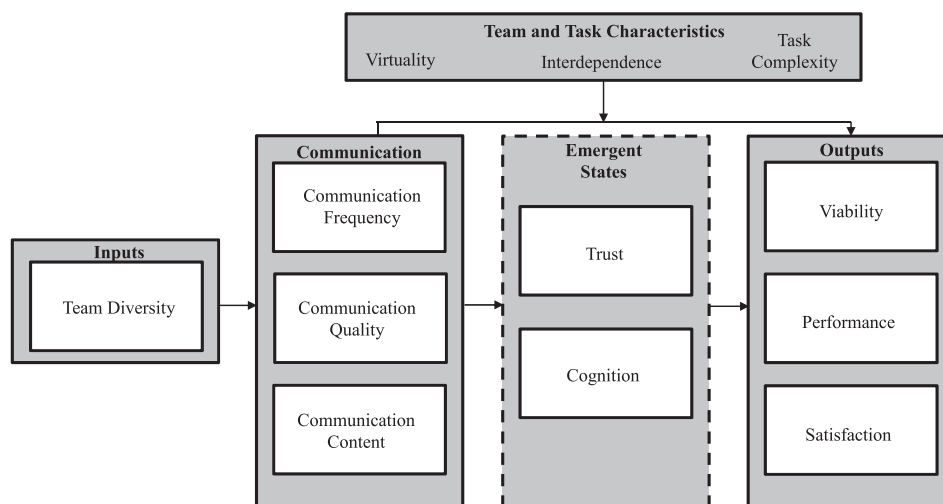


Fig. 1. Proposed communication process framework in virtual teams.

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