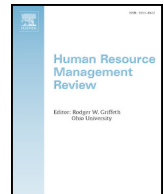




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/humres

Investigating the impacts of team type and design on virtual team processes

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

ABSTRACT

While much is known about virtual team processes and outcomes, the literature relies on a variety of team configurations and types (including student versus organizational samples, short-term versus long-term teams, functional versus project-based teams, and teams with various task types) yet has not systematically examined how these differences impact team processes. This is important because much of the virtual teams research has been based on student samples, which are easier to access and control, with the implicit assumption that the findings from student samples will generalize to organizational virtual teams. This manuscript reviews the last 15 years of research on virtual teams and conducts an analysis of team type and study design on a sample of 265 articles. We then analyze several systematic differences based on these factors that are apparent in research in three areas: leadership, cultural composition, and technology use, and develop propositions to guide future research in these areas. Our findings have important implications for future virtual teams research by suggesting that researchers should be more explicit about the biases carried by particular methods and designs and the ways in which they impact our knowledge of the field.

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1. Introduction

As communication technologies have become more sophisticated and diverse over the past two decades their use by virtual teams has grown, as has scholarly attention to such teams (see Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2014; Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004; Stanko & Gibson, 2009 for reviews). While much is known about virtual team processes and outcomes, the literature relies on a variety of team configurations and types (including student versus organizational samples, short-term versus long-term teams, functional versus project-based teams, and teams with various task types) yet has not systematically examined how these differences impact team processes. This is important because much of the virtual teams research has been based on student samples, which are easier to access and control, with the implicit assumption that the findings from student samples will generalize to organizational virtual teams.

Virtual teams span an array of team types and configurations. For instance, some teams have a formal leader, while others are self-managed. Teams in some studies are ongoing and members have pre-existing, established roles and relationships with one another, while teams in other studies are zero-history and members are randomly assigned. While virtual teams are often culturally diverse, their configuration may vary such that some teams are split between two locations with dominant cultural groups

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(e.g., the U.S. and India), while other teams are composed of one member per site, each of a different nationality. Further, virtual teams rely on a growing range of technologies, and while a wealth of research has studied the impacts of technology in virtual teams (for reviews see Fjermestad, 2004 and Rains, 2005), less attention has been devoted to unpacking the particular communication media repertoires (Watson-Manheim & Bélanger, 2007) used by such teams and the ways in which they shape team processes. Rather than assuming that findings will generalize across various team designs and technologies, there is a need to unpack the ways in which various team types, tools, configurations, and reporting structures shape virtual team processes and provide boundary conditions for research on virtual teams. In this article, we systematically review virtual teams research over the last 15 years in order to identify boundary conditions and gaps in the research.

Our findings highlight important differences in team type (especially student versus organizational) and suggest that both key assumptions and findings may be conditioned by study designs in systematic ways. These findings call attention to the importance of unpacking different team types and designs in research on virtual teams. The literature has tended to lump together student samples and organizational samples, field and lab studies, and short-term and long-term teams and treat them as functionally equivalent. Our findings suggest that student virtual teams may possess different characteristics that impact team processes in fundamentally different ways and challenge their comparability with field studies of organizational teams.

To illustrate how study design impacts our knowledge of virtual teams, we focus on three key research topics: leadership, cultural composition, and technology use, and analyze how findings on these topics are shaped by team type, configuration, and study design. Our analysis makes important contributions to the virtual teams literature by developing propositions to guide future research as well as by urging scholars to consider their implicit methodological biases and the ways in which these choices shape their assumptions and findings. Our findings help to inform future research and practice on virtual teams in field settings by helping better specify the boundary conditions of existing knowledge in the field and its application to particular team types. In so doing, we address the underexplored role played by both team type and study design in virtual team processes and extend theory on their impacts.

2. Review of virtual teams research over the last 15 years

We conducted a thorough review of the research on virtual teams published over the last 15 years. Using the interdisciplinary Web of Science, EBSCO, and JSTOR research databases, we ran a search for articles containing any of the terms “global”, “distributed”, “dispersed”, or “virtual” plus “teams” in order to capture the various labels used for virtual (most commonly defined as geographically distributed and electronically dependent) teams in the literature. Given that research on virtual teams started to burgeon in the early 2000’s, we included literature from 2000 to 2015, focusing on empirical journal articles and omitting theory or review pieces, conference proceedings, and book chapters.

Our initial search yielded over 500 articles. To narrow this down to the most relevant articles, all three authors went through the abstracts and excluded articles that were (1) not empirical studies or (2) about teams per se. We ended up with a final sample of 265 articles. We divided them up among the three researchers who then coded each article based on the following criteria: data collection (field versus lab study), type of analysis (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), sample (organizational versus student population), team type (project, functional, or mixed), team temporality (long-term, short-term, or mixed), and whether leadership, culture, and technology were measured. We then ran a descriptive analysis of our sample characteristics. A summary of our analysis can be found in Table 1.

Overall, the number of articles grew steadily from 2000 to 2010, peaked in 2011, and then declined a bit (see Fig. 1). Our analysis revealed that the vast majority of studies were field-based (77.7%) compared to lab-based (22.3%). Our coding process revealed some challenges in classifying virtual teams into traditional methodological categories. For instance, a common research design is to set up virtual teams of students and have them work together to conduct a class project. While student teams are different from organizational virtual teams in that they are artificially composed for the purposes of a class assignment rather than working on on-going, paid work assignments, they are also different from traditional lab studies in that they are doing meaningful, often professional, work for which they are rewarded (through a grade). Some teams of MBA students design prototypes or conduct project work for companies from various industries. These projects also typically last several weeks or months and take place outside of a lab. Given that student project-based teams can be argued to be completing “real” work as opposed to an artificial laboratory task, we included both studies of organizational teams and student project teams as field studies. We further broke out these categories into field studies with organizational samples (58.5%) versus field student samples (18.9%), or lab studies of student samples (20.0%) versus lab organizational samples (2.6%). Of these, organizational samples (60.4%) were more common than student samples (38.1%) overall, with a small minority using both organizational and student teams (1.5%). In

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Journal disciplines	Data collection	Methods	Sample type	Team type	Team temporality
Management	41.9%	Field 77.7%	Quantitative 60.0%	Organizational 60.4%	Project 78.1%
Information systems	32.8%	Lab 22.3%	Qualitative 29.8%	Student 38.1%	Functional 12.5%
Small groups	11.3%		Mixed 10.2%	Mixed 1.5%	Mixed 9.4%
Communication	6.8%				
Engineering	5.3%				
Other social science	1.9%				

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