



Research Report

The influence of disposition and social ties on trust in new virtual teammates



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ABSTRACT

With the increased presence of social media tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook, social network information is now commonplace. Social media websites prominently display the social distance or so-called “degrees of separation” among users, effectively allowing people to view their shared social ties with others, including prospective teammates they have not met. Through the presentation and manipulation of social network information, this longitudinal experiment investigated whether dispositional and relational variables contribute to “swift trust” among new virtual teammates. Data from 74 participants were collected to test a path analytic model predicting that social ties and propensity to trust influence perceptions of a new teammate’s trustworthiness (ability, benevolence, and integrity) as well as the willingness to trust that new teammate when given the opportunity to do so. Path analysis indicated good model fit, but showed no significant evidence that social ties or propensity to trust affect perceived trustworthiness at the initial point of team engagement. Additionally, only one component of perceived trustworthiness (perceived ability) and propensity to trust were found to predict trusting behavior towards a new, unknown, teammate.

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1. Introduction

With the creation of social networking websites, network connections and social distance have become increasingly explicit and visible. This has implications for the workplace. Social networking sites such as LinkedIn have emerged for professional purposes, providing means for individuals/organizations to display their credentials and network with colleagues. With membership exceeding 200 million (Braga, 2013), LinkedIn allows users to post information regarding professional qualifications (e.g., educational background, job title, and work experience) and formally “connect” or affiliate with other users.

While their particulars can vary across platforms and over time, online social-networking tools share important features in common. One noteworthy characteristic is the degree to which social networks are made apparent. For example, LinkedIn provides users with the names of potential connections – people the user may know and to which the user may wish to link or affiliate. When users are provided with suggested connections, they are also shown mutual acquaintances shared with the candidate for

connection. Thus, social ties are made explicit to people who use online social networking tools.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effects of social network information, specifically the presence of a shared social tie, on the formation of trust amongst new virtual collaborators. For practice, the question remains as to whether social network information about shared ties actually influences perceptions of unknown others. This study begins to address this gap in research by looking at how information regarding shared social ties may influence perceptions of an unknown coworker. To explore this in detail, we will first review literature on social networks and trust. We will then use literature on in-group favoritism to explain how the presence of social ties can influence trust in an unknown virtual collaborator.

1.1. Social networks

Social networks consist of groups of individuals (actors or nodes) and the ties among them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Particularly relevant to the context of virtual collaboration is the concept of social distance (i.e., “degrees of separation”), which Wasserman and Faust (1994) define as the length of the path between two actors (or nodes) within a social network. Paths are the distinct links between two individuals. For example, as seen

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in Fig. 1, the path between Cameron (N_1) and Jamie (N_3) consists of N_1 , I_1 , N_2 , I_2 , and N_3 , where “N” stands for “Node” and “I” stands for “link.” The distance between Cameron and Jamie is a length of two because there are two lines (I_1 and I_2) separating the individuals. It can thus be stated that Cameron and Jamie are two degrees of separation apart. Within a given social network, the distance between individuals can vary from a length of one (i.e., one degree of separation or a direct connection, as is the case with Cameron and Sam in Fig. 1) to many. It is also possible for an individual to share no connections or links with another person.

The prominence of information about shared social ties on social networking websites raises questions about the effects that such information may have on attitudes toward unknown others in general, and trust in particular. Virtual teamwork is a context in which this question is particularly relevant.

1.2. Trust in virtual teams

Virtual teams often exist within the context of high-risk, high-stakes outcomes (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). To facilitate group processes, initial trust amongst team members is essential (Gibson & Manuel, 2003; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998). The time-constrained context in which virtual teams often exist (Meyerson et al., 1996) contributes to a phenomenon known as “swift trust.” Swift trust occurs when individuals in temporary teams behave as if trust existed from the inception of the group (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

Though important, swift trust does not always occur. Nontrivial barriers to trust among new virtual teammates exist, putting virtual teams at risk of dissociation. Highly-virtual teams may be both high in geographic dispersion and electronic dependence (Cohen & Gibson, 2003). Consequently, factors that facilitate trust, progress, and accountability during face-to-face interactions (e.g., opportunities to monitor teammates’ progress and social control factors such as supervisory authority) may not present themselves during virtual collaboration (Gibson & Manuel, 2003), potentially threatening the development of trust.

There is a need to understand what contributes to initial baseline levels of trust, and even swift trust, among virtual teammates with no history of collaboration. A good starting point is to look at the assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs people hold when they first enter a relationship with a new virtual teammate. Research in social psychology (e.g., behavioral confirmation; Snyder & Stukas, 1999) indicates that we tend to elicit from others the behaviors that we expect. This highlights the importance of examining factors that shape people’s expectations and assumptions about new, virtual teammates whom they have not yet met. Such assumptions can affect initial and subsequent interactions and relationships.

Certain key dispositional and relational factors may predispose people to trust a new, virtual teammate prior to initial contact. Although previous literature has extensively addressed trust-related phenomena during teamwork, there is a dearth of research examining factors that precede team formation. What encourages or discourages individuals to quickly trust a newly assigned teammate with whom they share no history? The current study begins addressing this question by proposing a rudimentary model of

initial trust (Fig. 2). For ease of exposition, an individual who is faced with the opportunity to trust a new, unknown, teammate shall be addressed as “subject.”

1.3. Perceived trustworthiness

One key antecedent to trust is perceived trustworthiness – that is, the subject’s judgment of the attributes of the trustee (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Perceived trustworthiness consists of three dimensions – ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995). Ability is the degree to which the trustee is believed to possess the necessary skills, competencies, and abilities within a specific domain. Benevolence is the degree to which the subject believes the trustee will engage in behavior beneficial to the well-being of the subject (Mayer et al., 1995). Integrity is the degree to which the trustee is believed to follow principles and guidelines that are accepted by the subject. Research outside of the context of new, virtual teammates has supported the link between all three dimensions of perceived trustworthiness and trust (Colquitt et al., 2007). Thus, perceived trustworthiness is expected to affect baseline levels of trust experienced by new virtual collaborators (Fig. 2).

1.4. Propensity to trust

Disposition has been shown to be a strong predictor of trust (Colquitt et al., 2007; Mayer et al., 1995; Wildman et al., 2012; Yakovleva, Reilly, & Werko, 2010). Mayer et al. (1995) define propensity to trust as the “general willingness to trust others” (p. 715). In the absence of extensive information about a prospective teammate, subjects have little or no basis for judging the new teammate’s trustworthiness. Under such circumstances, people with a predisposition or propensity to trust may be especially likely to give new teammates the benefit of the doubt. They are prone to trusting others at the outset, suggesting a direct link from trust propensity to initial trusting behavior, particularly when faced with limited information about the new collaborator (Fig. 2).

Admittedly, people are typically provided with some, albeit limited, information about prospective teammates before collaboration begins. For example, prior to working together, teammates could gain information about each other’s job title, experience, coworkers, hobbies, etc. through word of mouth, résumés, social networking websites, and other sources. Whereas background information about a prospective teammate may trigger skepticism among those with a low trust propensity, it may signal trustworthiness to people with a predisposition to trust (Yakovleva et al., 2010). Thus, propensity to trust is expected to both influence trust directly, as suggested above, and indirectly by shaping perceptions of a teammate’s trustworthiness (Fig. 2). Those with a predisposition to trust are expected to engage in trusting behaviors because they are especially inclined to (a) trust people without knowing their trustworthiness and (b) view new teammates as trustworthy based on limited information.

1.5. Social ties and trust

Importantly, opportunities to trust new teammates do not emerge in a vacuum (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). When studying the relationship between members of any dyad or team, it is necessary to consider the social network within which the members exist. However, only a handful of studies have attempted to include social context in the examination of trust between coworkers (e.g., Ferrin, Dirks, & Shah, 2006; Lau & Liden, 2008). The present study begins to fill this gap in research by looking at trust formation within the context of social networks.

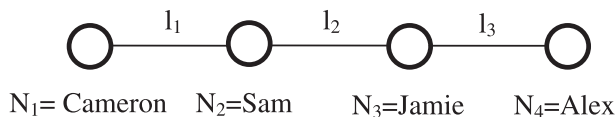


Fig. 1. Distance in social networks.

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