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## Working Across Boundaries: Current and Future Perspectives on Global Virtual Teams

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### ABSTRACT

Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) are a commonplace in contemporary organizations, and an already established topic of research in international management. While we have a good understanding of advantages and challenges associated with this ubiquitous form of work groups, this special issue aims to contribute to theory development by focusing on key drivers that influence the success of GVTs, along with ways for mitigating their challenges. We briefly review current knowledge on GVTs and propose a structuring framework that can help with both organizing what we know about GVTs, and with guiding the conversation on where the research on this topic might focus next. We then introduce four special issue articles that illustrate avenues for generating new empirical evidence towards uncovering key characteristics and dynamics underlying GVTs complexities, providing useful insights for both theory development and managerial practice.

### 1. Introduction

As organizations have shifted from hierarchical and rigid bureaucratic structures towards more organic organizational designs, work teams have become more prevalent. Global expansion and mobility, along with technological developments, sparked the need and created the possibility of expanding the scope of teams beyond the traditional collocated arrangements, giving rise to the now ubiquitous Global Virtual Teams (GVTs). Also known as multinational and multicultural distributed teams (Connaughton and Shuffler, 2007), transnational team (Haas, 2006), or multinational workgroups (Hambrick et al., 1998), GVTs are most often defined as “temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, and electronically communicating work group[s]” (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999). Organizations often don't even emphasize the “global” and “virtual” aspects when referring to their GVTs, as working across boundaries has become the norm, rather than an exception, with members of such teams being not just full-time or part-time employees, but also freelancers, contractors, suppliers, and other collaborators.

The popularity of GVT has not been limited to the business world – it is a widely spread form of work in other domains, including academia. For instance, the editors of this special issue are based in North America, Europe and Australia: we have never met face-to-face in preparing this special issue, nor have we been in one same location while working on it. Even in organizations based in a single country, employees often have to complete projects in GVTs, as the company's supply chains and distribution networks increasingly cross national borders, include culturally diverse team members (even if operating within the borders of one country),

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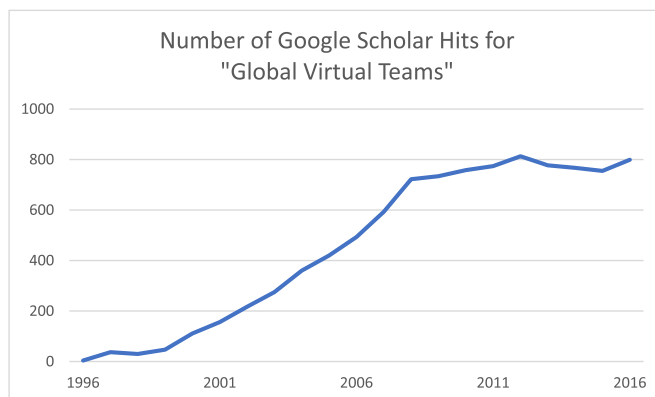


Fig. 1. Number of Google scholar hits for "Global Virtual Teams".

and address projects that cross a range of boundaries.

The Gartner Group survey estimated in 2000 that by 2004 up to 60% of all professional and management tasks within world's biggest multinational corporations would be completed by virtual teams, including GVTs (Biggs, 2000). More recent studies report that between 50 and 70% of all white-collar workers in OECD countries at least occasionally work on projects that require some form of virtual collaboration, and of those 20 to 35% involve collaborations across national borders – and the number of such interactions is increasing (c.f., Duarte and Snyder, 2011; Kurtzberg, 2014). At the same time, there is a sobering evidence that at least half of such GVTs fail to fully meet their strategic objectives due to inability to manage the complexities arising from global virtual collaboration (Zakaria et al., 2004).

Researchers have recognized the complexities, as well as the potential of GVTs. The management literature has begun to accumulate valuable knowledge around this phenomenon. A Google Scholar search for "Global Virtual Teams" returns virtually no hits prior to 1996, but reaches about 800 studies per year by 2012, a figure which is relatively maintained since (Fig. 1). The results are similar when searching for studies focused on "virtual teams", "transnational teams", and related terms, suggesting that the scholarly community is genuinely interested in the phenomenon or working across boundaries, beyond popular catch-phrases of terms.

GVTs have been touted as an effective work arrangement for problem solving, global innovation and project management (EIU, 2015). Indeed, they offer a number of advantages, including flexibility with respect to geography and timing. However, they also face unique challenges of communication and coordination. We next review advantages and challenges commonly mentioned in the literature on GVTs, along with suggesting an organizing framework for this knowledge. We then introduce the four articles included in this special issue, showing how they address current gaps in the field, and how they point out to potential avenues for future research. We conclude with our own suggestions for important related questions to be considered in developing this line of research, in particular in relation to recent changes in the context of work that might further change how GVTs are used, how the function, and what might be the best way to manage them.

## 2. Existing research insights about GVTs

The extant research provides a detailed review of the phenomenon of GVTs (for detailed reviews, see Axtell et al., 2004; Gibson and Cohen, 2003; Gilson et al., 2015; Martins et al., 2004; Maznevski et al., 2006; O'Leary and Cummings, 2007; Scott and Wildman, 2015). We focus here on a review of the opportunities and challenges associated with GVTs that are commonly described in the literature.

### 2.1.1. GVTs opportunities

One category of advantages often cited in the literature stem from the economic benefits of GVTs. For instance, having the ability to bring together best talent regardless of the team members' locations and without them having to leave their home saves cost and time. Moreover, dispersing project members around the globe allows for a 24-h relay workflow where GVT members located in Asia and Australia work on the project during their business hours, pass it on to their colleagues in Europe/Africa for further processing during their business hours, and then on to the colleagues in Americas, who can work on it while their more eastern team members are asleep, and then back on to the team members in Asia in Australia when their new days starts. This can dramatically speed up project completion time, which could be a great competitive advantage.

Further, team diversity can have a positive impact on GVT's ability to solve problems. Although still comparatively small, a growing body of research finds that team diversity improves GVT effectiveness. Indeed, diverse backgrounds of team members can create value by providing a greater diversity of perspectives which, in turn, allows for tapping a wider range of information sources, feeding off more networks, and thus aiding creativity and problem solving (DiStefano and Maznevski, 2000; Ng and Tung, 1998).

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