

EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR GLOBALLY-DISTRIBUTED VIRTUAL TEAMS

Preparing the workforce of the future

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The New Model of Work

Today, information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow individuals located in different nations to collaborate almost as easily as if they were located in the same physical office. As a result, globally-distributed virtual teams now support the work of organizations across a spectrum of products and services. Such teams are used by a range of for-profit and nonprofit organizations including businesses, government organizations, military organizations, and educational institutions. These organizations are increasingly employing individuals located in different nations to engage in various types of collaborative work via ICTs.

As a result of these factors, much of the modern workforce is now migrating toward a virtual model of work in which individuals in different locations use online media to collaborate on projects. At the same time, forces associated with globalization are changing the nature of competitiveness in the new economy and prompting more organizations to use ICTs to distribute work internationally. Today's workers, in turn, must often adapt rapidly to virtual



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environments and do so with little or no formal preparation in the types of professional communication practices essential to success in such contexts. As a result, individuals working in internationally distributed teams must generally learn from their mistakes, an effective but often costly approach. Moreover, these individuals must also adapt to working in an environment in which they are regularly paired with new colleagues and clients from different nations, cultures, and language groups.

The Need for Training

The modern distributed workplace described here requires employees to account for and address three central factors—technology, culture, and language—in order to succeed in most work-related tasks. An all-important question arising from this global workplace is,

How can we better prepare individuals for this international, online context?

Answering and addressing this question, however, is a more complicated process than it might seem at first.

A 2012 *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* special issue on global training reveals, however, that very little information on training—particularly training related to communicating effectively in globally-distributed virtual teams—has been published in the major professional communication journals in the last ten years (Brewer, Tan, & Melton, 2012). Additionally, many employers note that they are unable to provide workers with the training needed to interact effectively in these globally-distributed virtual teams. Brewer's (Brewer, In press) research with communication and engineering professionals, for example, revealed that 68% of the subjects surveyed admitted their employers provided little or no formal training related to working effectively in international online contexts. Additionally, while 17% of the survey subjects noted that their employers provided some form of training in this area, many thought this training was limited in some way. Such issues need to be addressed if educators, trainers, and corporate employers alike wish to prepare adult learners to be successful participants in current (and future) organizational practices and processes.

This special issue on education and training for globally-distributed virtual teams seeks to examine this topic through a variety of articles (research, industry perspectives, and teaching cases) that present different ideas, approaches, and insights on how best to prepare individuals to succeed in this new workplace.

The Contents of This Issue

This special issue begins with Leonard, Sherblom, Withers, and Smith's article reporting their focus group research involving 200 participants who completed a virtual-team training program. The authors' analysis reveals a complex relationship of presence and identity to communication openness and conversational interactivity. Through identifying and examining such factors, their results and analysis contribute to our understanding of the types of training methods that best prepare participants to communicate effectively in globally-distributed, professional communication teams.

Further exploring the effects of presence in virtual teams, authors Weems-Landingham, Rose, and Cook-Euell analyze the importance of availability, presence, and silence and their effects on virtual team communication. The authors point out that understanding the effect culture has on online presence will result in enhanced training and preparation for GVTs, increased collaboration, swifter adaptation, more effective communication, and greater organizational success.

Next, Lin and Yu's industry perspective provides an effective overview of the aspects of globally-distributed work examined by other entries. In this article, Lin and Yu draw from interviews conducted with people working in such virtual teams to identify practices that best facilitate communication in virtual workplace contexts. Through these interviews, Lin and Yu examine technologies for, challenges related to, and success strategies for communicating in virtual teams.

The Lin and Yu article is followed by three teaching cases, the first of which is Hanson's report on an online graduate course she developed to prepare students to negotiate the boundaries of language difference in online contexts. As Hanson explains, through a series of scaffolded explorations, students developed

and implemented strategies for interacting on an internet site using an unfamiliar language. In fact, using Hanson's strategies, students were able to sustain an online conversation in a language with which they were not familiar. Such strategies can hold important implications for how organizations might better prepare their employees to negotiate languages in online teams.

In a second teaching case, Clark, Berardy, Hannah, Seager, Selinger, and Makanda report on the effects of group tacit knowledge in globally-distributed virtual teams. To examine this topic, they observed international students (from the U.S. and Uganda) interacting in a Twitter-based game. The authors then conclude that players who develop tacit knowledge during the game display an increased interpersonal capacity for leadership, empathy, and cross-cultural thinking – all of which enhance collaboration between diverse groups. This teaching case thus yields important insights for developing tacit knowledge in order to improve interpersonal skills in globally-distributed virtual teams.

The third and final teaching case—by Sorensen, Hammer, and Maylath—provides readers with a look into the current state of a longitudinal teaching partnership—the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (TAPP). As part of TAPP, the authors have facilitated global virtual team projects between students in the U.S. and Europe for 15 years. The authors use these experiences as a foundation for discussing how projects can be adapted to diverse disciplines and technologies, how to manage such projects, and the tools participants have developed to aid in project management for this undertaking.

As a whole, this issue provides valuable perspectives and approaches for better preparing individuals to work in and manage globally-distributed virtual teams. We, the editors, hope readers will view this collection of work as a key stepping stone—if not a crucial first step—to understanding how ideas on, attitudes toward, and perspectives of culture, language, and technology can affect how members of different cultures interact in globally-distributed virtual teams. ■

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