

NEGOTIATING AVAILABILITY WITHIN GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS (GVTs)

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This paper explores the relationship between culture and negotiating availability within global virtual teams (GVTs). Dimensions from the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) research program are used to theorize the effects that four cultural dimensions (Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, In-group Collectivism, and Gender Egalitarianism) have on articulating availability within GVTs. Research (Panteli, 2004) on articulating presence in virtual organizing suggests that availability (i.e., an individual's presence and willingness to commit to interdependent work) is not scripted or mandated, but negotiated among the members of a virtual team. Better understanding the impact that culture has on articulating presence will result in enhanced training and preparation for GVTs, increased collaboration, swifter adaptation, more effective communications, and greater organizational success.

Keywords. Global virtual teams (GVTs), Articulating presence, Negotiating availability, Culture, GLOBE, Communications, Uncertainty avoidance, Power distance, In-group collectivism, Gender egalitarianism.

This paper explores the relationship between culture and the negotiation of presence within GVTs. In particular, it looks at four cultural dimensions from the GLOBE Research Program: Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, In-Group



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Collectivism, and Gender Egalitarianism to understand varying ways in which GVT members negotiate availability. The purpose of this article is to understand how each dimension impacts the articulation of three states of availability (Panteli, 2004): *present availability*, *absent unavailability*, and *silenced availability*. After which, best practices for negotiating availability are proposed. In order to achieve this end, we provide a brief overview of key concepts, review the hypothesis and methodology enlisted, discuss cultural dimensions, and hypothesize their influence on articulating presence. Finally, we conclude by offering best practices for negotiating availability within GVTs.

An Overview of Key Concepts

Global Virtual Teams

Global virtual teams (GVTs) are comprised of groups of culturally and geographically dispersed individuals working interdependently to complete a specific task or tasks (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Maynard et. al., 2012; O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994; Walther, 1995). These individuals typically possess the expertise needed to complete the assigned tasks related to a given project. However, knowledge alone does not predetermine success for the overall group. Success is instead dependent upon a number of factors, including the ability for group members to work collectively in order to accomplish clearly stated and mutually accepted interdependent goals (Javenpaa et al., 2004; Kankanhalli et al., 2006, Saunders et al., 2004). Virtual global work begins when the members of a group communicate their availability and willingness to participate in a common project or activity.

Cultural differences in communication style can complicate GVT formation (Egan et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2008; Ruppel et al., 2013). Initial efforts must be made to clearly communicate availability before team formation can proceed (Baba et al., 2004; Lee-Kelley & Sankey, 2008; Weems-Landingham,

2009). It is only after members articulate their presence, availability, and desire to participate that the work can begin.

Articulating Presence & Negotiating Availability

Panteli's (2004) study on articulating presence serves as a framework for understanding the need to communicate presence within GVTs. This work suggests that availability is neither scripted nor mandated, but negotiated among members. Panteli (2004) found that these negotiation efforts result in three separate and distinct states: present availability, absent unavailability, and silenced availability.

The first and most desirable state is *present availability*. Here, members articulate their availability and willingness to participate in a GVT (e.g., "Yes; I would be willing to participate."). *Absent unavailability* is the next desired state, and potential members articulate, through various methods, their unavailability and/or unwillingness to participate (e.g., an email response noting that they are unable to provide the required support). As a result, team formulation moves forward by pursuing other resources needed to complete interdependent tasks. Finally, *silenced availability* is the least desired state. In these cases, potential members do not respond to inquiry at all. They instead remain silent to requests for assistance and membership, and this state proves problematic as it hinders GVT formation. (In essence, team members continue to wait for a reply that does not come, and team formation and interaction are put on hold.)

Within a GVT context, silence lacks the cues needed to interpret meaning—that the lack of response means "No; I am not interested in participating." By default, this silence promotes misinterpretation and leads to frustrations and a sense of lack of commitment (Panteli & Fineman, 2005). The interpretation of silence, however, is reliant upon culture. For example, the Japanese view silence as a sign of respect (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984; Morsbach, 1973; Sano et al., 1999). Also, evidence suggests that members of eastern cultures often regard silence as appropriate, and subordinates consider it a show of respect when receiving emails from superiors (Lee, 2002; Straub, 1994).

The critical importance of Panteli's work is not simply indicating the various ways we articulate presence, but is also uncovering the process of negotiating it.

Culture & Articulation

One way to look at individual differences and the effects they can have on articulation of presence across cultures is to first acknowledge cultural differences. For the purposes of this article, *culture* is defined as learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, and traditions which define the way of life for a group of people (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). People differ in many ways, and culture is merely one of them. While embracing cultural differences allows us to communicate more effectively, we must caution that overreliance on inflexible generalities can lead to counterproductive behavior (e.g., prejudice and stereotypes).

Several well-known studies have been conducted to determine how individuals differ in terms of communication expectations across cultures (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980 & 2010; McClelland, 1961; Trompenaars, 1994). Of all the research, Hofstede's (1980 & 2010) cultural dimensions have received the greatest acclaim and criticism. Hofstede became renowned for raising awareness of the effects cultural differences have on work-related values and practices. Hofstede's work described five cultural dimensions: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, future orientation, individualism-collectivism and masculinity-femininity. While critics (e.g., Ailon, 2008 & 2009; McSweeney, 2002a & 2002b) are quick to highlight the perceived limitations of Hofstede's dimensions, his research remains an important pillar to our understanding, exploration, and application of culture to everyday life.

In his work, Hofstede (2010) discusses the use of and expansion of his cultural dimensions, and he warns that researchers should be modest in their uses of these dimensions to construct representations of cultures. He further states that these dimensions do not "exist," writing the following:

Dimensions should not be reified. They do not “exist” in a tangible sense. They are constructs, “not directly accessible to observations but inferable from verbal statements and other behaviors and useful predicting still other observable and measureable verbal and nonverbal behavior” (Levitin, 1973:492). If they exist, it is in our minds – we have defined them into existence. They are supposed to help us in understanding and handling the complex reality of our social world. If they cannot do this they are redundant. (Hofstede 2010: 1344-1345)

In sum, Hofstede is saying cross-cultural dimensions are not necessary truths but ideas, constructs instrumental to understanding and predicting cross-cultural communication practices—particularly in global virtual environments.

GLOBE Research Program

No research has been more comprehensive in studying cultural difference than the GLOBE research program initiated by Robert House in 1991 (House et al., 2004). This effort involved 160 investigators across 62 cultures and studied 17,000 managers within 950 organizations. The purpose of the project was to understand cultural differences affecting cross-cultural interactions and effectiveness. The GLOBE studies, in essence, expanded Hofstede’s work to nine dimensions impacting the success of cross-cultural interaction (see Table 1).

In this paper, we explore four of the nine GLOBE dimensions (Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, In-Group Collectivism, and Gender Egalitarianism) to bring continuity, understanding, and construct knowledge, and to further our understanding of negotiating availability in GVTs.

Table 1

The GLOBE’s Nine Dimensions Impacting Cross-Cultural Interaction

Uncertainty Avoidance	The extent to which a cultural group relies on preestablished norms, rules and rituals to prescribe behavior. This dimension promotes the idea that some cultures communicate in a more structured, ritualistic, and predictive manner than do others.
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Power Distance	The extent to which a cultural group accepts the unequal distribution of power among members. This dimension promotes the idea that some cultures communicate differently based upon money, prestige, status, and other perceptions of power.
Institutional Collectivism	The extent to which a cultural group values organizational interests over that of the individual. This dimension suggests that some cultures communicate with greater concern for the group's interests than do others.
In-group Collectivism	The extent to which a cultural group values pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness within the group. This dimension promotes the idea that some cultures communicate because of loyalty, devotion, and commitment to the group while others may not.
Gender Egalitarianism	The extent to which a cultural group accepts and promotes gender equality. This dimension suggests that some cultures minimize gender differences or consider gender a nonissue when communicating while others do not.
Assertiveness	The extent to which a cultural group accepts confrontation and aggressiveness behavior as a norm. This dimension suggests that some cultures communicate more assertively and forcefully than do others.
Future Orientation	The extent to which a cultural group engages in behavior associated with future planning and delayed gratification. This dimension promotes the idea that some cultures are more planned when communicating while others prove more spontaneous and focused on the present.
Performance Orientation	The extent to which a cultural group rewards members for performance outcomes. This dimension suggests that some cultures associate communications efforts with outcomes and performance rewards while others may not.
Humane Orientation	The extent to which a cultural group encourages and rewards members for being fair, altruistic, and kind to others. This dimension suggests that for some cultures communications are expected to be kind, fair, and socially supportive. This may not be true for others.

Hypothesis

This paper explores the relationship between culture and the negotiation of availability within global virtual teams (GVTs). It hypothesizes that culture impacts GVT members' negotiation and articulation of availability. In order to be effective, culturally and geographically disbursed members must communicate by sending and receiving messages using information and communications technologies (ICTs). At its onset, this process involves negotiating availability. Collaboration proceeds when members articulate a *present available* status. Negotiation continues when prospective members indicate *absent unavailability*. Failure results when prospects remain silent or nonresponsive.

While the GLOBE study puts forth nine cross-cultural dimensions associated with cross-cultural collaboration, we consider four to be the most salient in terms of examining GVTs. These four dimensions are

- Uncertainty avoidance
- Power distance
- In-group collectivism
- Gender egalitarianism

We decided to focus on these four dimensions in particular because they inform us as to the processes and behaviors within teams widely studied in the fields of business, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, education, and communications. Understanding these group dynamics helps explore the influence of culture on the negotiation of availability in relation to the initial attempts to form groups and participate in effective GVTs.

To illustrate this relationship, we look at and hypothesize the influence these four dimensions have on the articulation of availability: *present available*, *absent unavailability*, and *silenced availability*. To this end, the research reported here seeks to answer the research question: How do cultural differences in uncertainty avoidance, power distance, in-group collectivism, and gender egalitarianism influence the negotiation of availability with GVTs?

Discursive-Articulation Methodology

To achieve the goals of this research, we used a method of “discursive-articulation” in which the literature from one significant area of study is intertwined with the literature from a separate area of study (Rose, 2015; Foucault, 1984; Brown, 1977; Bourdieu, 1977; Habermas, 1971). The use value of this method is to reinvigorate an area of study that can significantly impact social praxis and values. The areas of cultural studies, critical sociology, and political studies have utilized elements of discourse and articulation to reveal an understanding of cultural practices and values (e.g., Blommaert & Bulean, 2000; Habermas, 1984; Hall, 1980; Gramsci, 1971; Rose, 2015; Rose, 2012). In this case, the purpose of using this approach was to identify everyday practices that a range of audiences can use in negotiating availability within GVTs and how they are initially formed. In studying negotiated availability and examining the cultural factors in those negotiations, this methodology is both appropriate and valuable in the construction of knowledge, perspectives, and culture in GVTs.

Cultural Dimensions

The following sections apply the methodology of discursive articulation to explore the influence that 1) uncertainty avoidance, 2) power distance, 3) in-group collectivism, and 4) gender egalitarianism have on negotiated availability within GVTs.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the extent to which members rely on preestablished norms of behavior, rituals, and procedures to avoid the unknown (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004). Cultures that are high in uncertainty avoidance (e.g., The Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany) use strict rules, guidelines, and procedures to make availability more predictable and less uncertain. Those cultures that are low in uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Poland, Albania, Ecuador, and Morocco) do not rely on prescriptive approaches to

articulating availability. Group members from these low uncertainty avoidance cultures are therefore more apt to use unstructured rules, guidelines, and procedures that make availability less predictable and more uncertain.

In these situations, individual personality and/or local improvisational norms may play a role in shaping the exchanges. In the end, we find that members from cultures high in uncertainty avoidance are more likely to articulate/respond directly with language indicating *present available* or *absent unavailable*. These articulations will lead to more effective outcomes for those GVTs with that makeup provided these GVTs are comprised of individuals from different cultures. When GVTs contain members low in uncertainty avoidance, there is a likelihood that *silenced availability* may result because standard methods and procedures for communicating availability are less likely to exist. For these reasons, we suggest that a level of flexibility along with additional communication and collaboration efforts be enlisted to ensure quick and easy confirmation of member availability and commitment.

Power Distance

Power distance is defined as the extent to which members agree that it is acceptable for personal and position power to be unequally distributed (Northouse, 2013). Cultures high in power distance accept and agree that not all members should have power. When interacting in GVTs, individuals from such cultures will tend to segregate members and expected articulations in accordance with organizational status, power, authority, and position. Those teams comprised of members high in power distance assume varied responsiveness and alter communications tactics accordingly depending on the known status of the individuals participating in the GVT. Those cultures low in power distance (e.g., Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) do not vary inquiries and tactics. Instead, they use a relatively uniform approach for interactions, regardless of the status of those participating in the group. This unilateral approach may cause issues with member buy-in and commitment. Why? Because those unconcerned with power will often

articulate present and/or absent unavailability, while those high in power distance may remain silent, expecting more personalized communications efforts.

In-Group Collectivism

In-Group Collectivism is defined as the degree to which GVT members express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness within their team and organization (Northouse, 2013). Cultures high in this dimension (Taiwan, Guatemala, Panama, Venezuela, Columbia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Costa Rica, Peru, and South Korea) have a sense of belonging which mediates responsiveness to inquiry in order to maintain ties to/membership in the community. Thus, they will most likely articulate presence out of commitment and obligation to the collective. Those low in collectivism (e.g., New Zealand, Ireland, Switzerland, and Denmark) will be less likely to respond because they lack feelings of connectedness which promote loyalty, commitment, and enhanced communications efforts. When members possess smaller degrees of devotion, additional communication and collaboration efforts including use of power may be needed to ensure that availability is clearly articulated. For example, individuals might have to use mutually accepted personal and professional networks as means to gain access and responsiveness from these individuals.

Gender Egalitarianism

Gender egalitarianism measures the degree to which GVT members accept gender inequality. Cultures high in it (e.g., Greece, Hungary, and Finland) minimize gender differences and promote same treatment regardless of members' biological sex. High gender egalitarian cultures have more women in positions of authority, less occupational sex segregation, similar levels of educational attainment for males and females, and afford women greater decision-making roles in community affairs. GVTs comprised of members with high gender egalitarianism do not expect or condone differences in communications and responsiveness based upon gender. Communications efforts are the same for both

men and women. Presence, in turn, is articulated based upon dimensions outside of gender.

Those cultures low in gender egalitarianism (e.g., Egypt, Kuwait, and Turkey), much like power distance, embrace varied responsiveness and communications tactics. In these cultures, individuals communicate with men and women differently. Women, for example, will most likely be expected to articulate their presence, availability, and commitment. Men, by contrast, will be afforded the luxury of remaining silent and require more espoused communications efforts.

Best Practices for Negotiating Availability within GVTs

While critics have clearly highlighted weaknesses in the way researchers have used certain cultural dimensions, the facts remain: People differ across cultures (Hofstede, 1980 & 2001; House et al., 2004). These differences require that we alter our cross-cultural communications efforts in ways which facilitate adaptation, increase collaboration, and enhance effectiveness (Egan et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2014). In this section, we offer suggested best practices for managing uncertainty avoidance, power distance, in-group collectivism, and gender egalitarianism when communicating across geographically and culturally dispersed boundaries. While we caution against using generalities to bias expectations (i.e., Alion, 2008), we embrace the possibility that enhanced awareness will promote greater success. The following are best practices associated therein.

Negotiating Presence

When communicating within GVTs, it is important to begin by developing a basic understanding of the team's cultural makeup. This includes a list of members, country of origin, and cultural cluster (e.g., Sub-Saharan African, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Latin America, etc.) according to GLOBE (House et al., 2004). This independent work will help members develop a perfunctory understanding of the team and provide valuable insight before attempting to communicate.

A cultural awareness will assist members in developing communications strategies. Checking culture-based assumptions, however, will be paramount to successfully negotiating availability. Remember, culture is one aspect of individual difference as is personality, race, age, ethnicity, etc. A deeper understanding of diversity will be important to obtain an accurate perception of GVT makeup.

Finally, GVTs must establish expectations regarding the articulation of presence. This means developing measures for and rewarding responsiveness. Members will be more apt to negotiate availability if they know that doing so is expected. Establishing methods for avoiding uncertainty, managing power distance, increasing commitment, and promoting equality will ensure members know what needs to be done, their role in it, and what others expect.

Addressing Uncertainty

GVT members from cultures relying heavily on preestablished norms of behavior will be more likely to negotiate their availability. Those low in uncertainty avoidance may not. All can benefit from the establishment of procedures and processes which ensure the articulation of presence (e.g., using out of office email attendant, implementing standardized voicemail messages indicating availability, using scheduling tools, responding to messages within an allotted time frame, etc.). Swift collaboration results by communicating expectations up front. Communicating to those individuals from cultures that are high in uncertainty avoidance should be emphasized in order to increase the comfort level of those individuals. When communicating with those low in uncertainty avoidance, keep it brief, clear, and to the point.

Managing Power Distance

GVT members from cultures condoning unequal distribution of power among members may be more likely to remain silent when negotiating availability. Silence, however, is not always an indicator of lack of commitment. Instead it may be a cue that additional efforts are needed. Additional communications efforts

might include those listed in Table 2. Those low in power distance may be more apt to negotiate availability and share information more willingly.

Collaboration efforts for those high in power distance should be customized to eliminate bureaucratic power structures without compromising flexibility needed to effectively manage the flow of information across borders.

Table 2

Communication Strategies for Working with Silence

Customizing or individualizing communications	To do so individuals could move away from drafting standard emails and instead customize emails for particular members/audiences.
Establishing clearer lines of communications	To do so individuals could clearly define GVT member goals, roles, and responsibilities. Establishment of expectations could be written into a team contract in which all members participate in creating and sign in agreement.
Enlisting media choices which circumvent power structures	To do so individuals could enlist the use of discussion threads, wikis, and other tools which make the use of power less apt.
Exploring more readily available subject matter expertise	To do so individuals could develop and use knowledge bases as opposed to relying solely upon individual member expertise.

This approach means incorporating ICTs that address members' communications needs and circumvent biases. For example, one could develop discussion boards to facilitate equality of input on the part of all members. An understanding of the task (i.e., who is involved, what information they need, where they reside, why they have been selected, what tasks need to be accomplished, and how work will be conducted) will facilitate the negotiation of availability and exchange of information critical to success.

Enabling Commitment

GVT members from cultures which express pride in membership, loyalty, and commitment will be more apt to articulate a *present available* status when they feel connected to the team. Thus, efforts should be made to ensure they feel included at the onset. To the contrary, those low in in-group collectivism will not feel bound to the team and thus have an affinity toward *absent availability* or *silence*. Collaboration with these individuals may require interventions to build relationships and foster a sense of belonging. Efforts might include integrating team building activities throughout the lifecycle of the team, discussing and celebrating short-term wins, enlisting informal communications to develop trust and camaraderie, and integrating ICTs which aid in developing personal connections (e.g., pictures, Facebook, Instagram, etc.).

Promoting Equality

GVTs whose makeup consists of cultures that accept gender inequality may experience problems with men being nonresponsive to women. In these instances, guidelines and rules of engagement must be communicated to ensure responsiveness. The ground rules might include those listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Suggested Rules for Engagement for Teams with Varying Perceptions of Gender Inequality

Clarifying cultural differences	This objective can be achieved by being aware of culture-based gender bias and ensuring that it is not taken personally but communicated openly to minimize its impact. Asking team members to complete a short survey or participate in a blog/wiki where knowledge is shared about cultural differences that team members might know about, have experienced, or wish to keep from experiencing.
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Setting expectations regarding nonbias responsiveness	This objective can be achieved by developing guidelines which ensure members communicate and respond to all members, regardless of gender and other biases. Guidelines can be produced from survey responses of team members or participation in a blog/wiki. It is important to produce and share these expectations in writing, emails, or on a shared website/blog that is open to all team members to review and comment.
Articulating consequences	This objective can be achieved by articulating expectations and consequences associated with biased behavior. Team members can be asked on a team contract to develop consequences and agree to follow the guidelines and accept consequences.
Establishing procedures for addressing concerns	This objective can be achieved by developing methods for bringing problems to light and creating effective solutions. For example, provide instructions or protocols for team members for when concerns might arise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, culture affects communication and collaboration within all teams. This effort is compounded when working within global virtual teams as culture alters how members code, communicate, and decode information. This paper highlights four dimensions from the GLOBE research program: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, in-group collectivism, and gender egalitarianism in attempts to better understand their relation to articulation of presence. Through this examination, we conclude that GVTs comprised of members high in uncertainty avoidance are least likely to be silent yet available. They will articulate presence in accordance with personality traits when in mixed company. Those members and GVTs adhering to power distance and gender inequality will most likely need to alter communications efforts to ensure articulation of presence and commitment when membership is varied (hi and low). Finally, those from more

collectivist cultures will be less likely to be silent articulating availability due to a sense of loyalty and commitment.

An understanding of best practice for negotiating availability will enhance training and preparation for GVTs. Knowledge on negotiating presence, avoiding uncertainty, managing power distance, increasing commitment, and promoting equality will increase the awareness of individuals participating in GVTs, and this awareness of expectations and behavior differences allows for divergent views to be acknowledged and challenged when needed. This knowledge will also allow swifter adaptation due to this increased awareness and clearer approaches to communications needed to accomplish interdependent goals. More effective communications will result from the ability to more readily discern availability and commitment early on. Finally, greater organizational success will arise when members understand and accept difference, for doing so helps to establish clear, mutually accepted, interdependent goals and formulate GVTs in a timely fashion. ■

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