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Cultural differences in the perception of critical interaction behaviors in global virtual teams

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ABSTRACT

We investigated whether members of virtual teams from the U.S., India, and Belgium perceived the same interaction behaviors to be critical for team functioning as Dutch members from an earlier study. Thirteen virtual team workers from the U.S., 11 from India, and 11 from Belgium were interviewed by means of the Critical Incident Technique Flanagan [Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51, 327–358]. The total number of critical incidents from all countries was 493 and most incidents could be grouped into the same 13 categories as those found in the original Dutch study. However, the results showed that the distributions of the critical incidents from the American, Indian, and Belgian respondents differed from those of the Dutch. Indian and Belgian respondents also mentioned a new category of critical incidents: Respectfulness. The cultural differences were interpreted by means of Hofstede's [Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultures consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California, U.S.: SAGE Publications] dimensions.

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1. Introduction

Due to globalization, global virtual teams are commonplace and the number of virtual teams keeps growing. In their extensive overview of research on team processes, Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) highlighted that global virtual teams with members from different cultures are an emerging trend, but that theory and research on the subject are limited. Connaughton and Shuffler (2007) pointed out that cultural difference is an aspect, critical to the effectiveness of global virtual teams that needs to be researched. The present study offers insight into interaction behaviors that are viewed by members from different cultures to be critical for effective team functioning. Our study investigates whether (a) a category system of critical interaction behaviors in virtual teams developed in a previous study of Dutch professional virtual team workers (Dekker & Rutte, submitted for publication¹) needs to be extended when participants from other cultures are investigated, and (b) whether team workers from different cultures attach the same values to the categories. These findings are important because virtual team members, to be effective, need to understand one another's culture-driven expectations.

1.1. Critical interaction behaviors in global virtual teams

Global virtual teams are technology-mediated groups of people from different countries that work on common tasks (Hardin, Fuller, & Davison, 2007). Team members use interaction media such as chat, e-mail, audio conference, and video

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¹ Manuscript available upon request by the first author.

Table 1

13 categories of interaction behavior in virtual teams and how team members should behave per category (Dekker & Rutte, submitted for publication)

No.	Category label	Interaction behavior
1	Media use	Effectively matching the media to the task and effective use of media
2	Handling diversity	Taking into account language-, time zone-, and cultural differences when interacting and behaving accordingly
3	Interaction volume	Communicating short, to the point, and only when necessary
4	In-role behavior	Taking task and goal of the team seriously and complying with obligations
5	Structuring of meeting	Planning and structuring of meetings
6	Reliable interaction	Being predictable in behavior and responsive to messages of team members
7	Active participation	Showing active participation in meetings by contributing and listening
8	Including team members	Including and inviting team members for contribution
9	Task-progress communication	Communicating deadlines, actions, and progress of a task to the team
10	Extra-role behavior	Showing pro-social behavior towards team members
11	Sharing by leader	Sharing of information and decisions with the team by team leader
12	Attendance	Being involved in the meeting and not showing up late or not at all. No multitasking
13	Social-emotional communication	Talking about non-task-related subjects.
14	Respectfulness	Behaving in accordance with the hierarchy of the team

conferencing to interact with one another without needing to meet face-to-face. The more a team relies on media for interaction, the more virtual it is (Hertel, Geiser, & Konradt, 2005). Global virtual teams enable companies to combine skills, talents, and other advantages from people across the globe. Previous studies have shown that teams with members from different cultures outperform homogeneous teams (e.g. Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001; Watson, Johnson, Kumar, & Critelli, 1998; Watson & Kumar, 1992). The reasons for the growing number of virtual teams are obvious: reduced travel expenses, CO₂ emissions, and less working time wasted on traveling. In order to be able to compete in the global economy, organizations are almost forced to work with global virtual teams (Lu, Watson-Manheim, House, & Matzkevich, 2005).

To make virtual teams effective, it is important to focus on behaviors that are critical for effective team functioning. In a study among professional virtual team workers, Dekker and Rutte (submitted for publication) designed a framework of 13 categories that contain behaviors that are crucial in global virtual teams (see first 13 categories in Table 1). The categories contain behaviors that were perceived to be critical for the satisfaction and performance of the team. A comparison with frameworks from the literature on face-to-face interactions (e.g. Bales, 1950; Cooke & Szumal, 1994; Potter & Balthazard, 2002a, 2002b; Rousseau, Aubé, & Savoie, 2006) showed that most of the 13 categories were exclusive to virtual teams. Some categories partly overlapped with behaviors described in face-to-face frameworks, but the emphasis in virtual teams was different.

The 13 categories were derived from interviews with 30 professional global virtual team workers by means of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954). However, all interviewees were working in the Netherlands, which means that the findings might be culture-specific. The first question that the present study addressed was whether the 13 categories developed in the Dutch study could be generalized to other cultures, or whether new categories would emerge if virtual team members from other cultures were interviewed. The second question was whether members from different cultures would attach the same values to the different categories. In the next paragraph we will argue why we think that the framework may be culture specific.

1.2. The impact of cultures

Global virtual teams consist of people from different national cultures with different native languages and different value systems. Hofstede defined culture as “the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (1980, p. 25). Hardin et al. (2007) argued that it is reasonable to believe that cultural differences at the national level influence the way people interact in virtual teams and that, in turn, may influence team outcomes. These problems are difficult to solve because people may not realize how influenced they are by their culture until they meet people from other cultures and conflict occurs (Adler, 1983).

Janssens and Brett (2006) described three models of how teams can cope with cultural differences. An assumption that underlies these models is that people from different cultures have different cultural *precepts*. Cultural precepts are sets of norms or standards of how to interact with one another. Cultural differences in precepts, often unrecognized by the team members, can create inaccurate attributions, which leads to conflict and affects team performance (Cramton, Orvis, & Wilson, 2007; Janssens & Brett, 2006).

In the dominant coalition model, one culture dominates over other cultures. The culture of the corporate headquarters, as well as the common corporate language, usually stem from a single culture that is chosen as the dominant culture (Canney Davison & Ward, 1999). Dominant culture members may make up the majority of the team, but may also be a minority, or an individual. A second model, the integrative/identity model, stresses cooperative collaboration based on a common identity. Members of a team have adopted a common identity and superordinate goals. Janssens and Brett (2006) argued that this model is more culturally intelligent than the dominant coalition model because it generates fewer process losses. However, according to these researchers, the fusion model, in which culturally diverse teams have to accept and respect the coexistence of differences and utilize the unique qualities of those

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