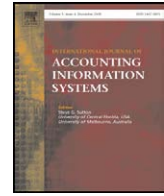




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The effects of reward structure, media richness and gender on virtual teams

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of virtual teams. We hypothesize that the use of a mixed-incentive reward structure will increase team member satisfaction, affect group cohesion and decrease perceived social loafing in a virtual team environment. We also hypothesize that team member satisfaction and team cohesion will increase and perceived social loafing will decrease with the use of a richer technology medium in a virtual team environment. In addition, we hypothesize that in a virtual team environment, team member satisfaction, group cohesion and perceived social loafing will differ between males and females. Using eighty-nine MBA students at a large southeastern university as participant's for our study, we find that perceived social loafing decreases with the use of a mixed-incentive reward structure in a virtual team environment. We also find that perceived social loafing decreases with the use of a richer technology medium in a virtual team environment. Finally, we find that perceived social loafing differs between males and females and that females perceive more social loafing when there is not a mixed-incentive scheme. The results shed light on the role of gender in virtual teams.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine the issue of how to promote teambuilding in virtual teams—that is, teams where the work is performed by team members who are often geographically, temporally, and sometimes even organizationally dispersed—wherein team members communicate through some combination of computer-

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mediated communication. E-mail, instant messaging, discussion boards, real-time video-conferencing, and similar technology may all be employed to facilitate discussion and decision-making; however, because team members are often not physically co-located, virtual team members can feel isolated and socially unconnected to their team members from lack of physical contact. Prior research has shown that such isolation can lead to lack of commitment, cohesion and satisfaction with the team process.

Additionally, according to the Social Impact Theory (Latané, 1981), individuals working in a group may be more inclined to decrease their effort when their individual efforts cannot be expressly observed and evaluated. Blaskovich (2008, 27) notes, “Although long associated with poor group performance, social loafing has been identified in recent information systems research as a particularly critical problem for [virtual teams] because the dynamics of the virtual setting may exacerbate the behavior (Driskell et al., 2003; Chidambaram and Tung, 2005).” Blaskovich (2008) provides evidence that indeed individual effort declines in a virtual team environment, contrary to earlier evidence provided by Chidambaram and Tung (2005).

Although there is a significant body of work on face-to-face team dynamics, there is little prior work on the dynamics of virtual teams. As advocated by Martins et al. (2004, 822), we advance the study of virtual teams by focusing “on understanding the functioning of virtual teams rather than on simply comparing them to face-to-face teams” and examining “how the extent of virtualness affects virtual team functioning.” In an extensive literature review of virtual teams, Martins et al. (2004) identifies social integration and affect management as factors that have not yet been examined in the virtual team literature. To this end, we study three such factors in a virtual team setting, reward structure, technology medium richness, and gender, to observe the impact on the level of social loafing, satisfaction with the team process, and cohesion of the virtual team—sociological factors that directly impact successful teambuilding. We note that our study does not measure a reduction in actual social loafing. Rather, we are interested in sociometric measures such as the perception that a team member is working hard. While perceptions may or may not reflect reality, perceptions can have a significant impact on attitudes of team members and on the teambuilding function, which is the central research issue in this paper. Our goal is to provide insight into factors that will increase teambuilding in virtual teams, and to inform organizations on how to structure more effective virtual teams.

We investigate whether implementing a reward structure that allows team members a voice in peer evaluation will increase member satisfaction, affect team cohesiveness and reduce perceived social loafing. Secondly, we investigate whether using a richer technology medium reduces perceived social loafing and increases satisfaction and cohesiveness among team members. Thirdly, we examine whether gender has an effect on member satisfaction, team cohesiveness and perceived social loafing.

Eighty-nine MBA students at a large southeastern university participated in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions, with each gender randomly assigned within the four manipulated conditions. The teams then each completed three written projects in a virtual team environment over a three-week period. The two manipulated variables were reward structure (mixed-incentive or non-mixed-incentive—we refer to these as “bonus” or “no bonus”) and technology medium (rich vs. lean). Gender (male vs. female) serves as a measured independent variable. The dependent measures we use include team member satisfaction, team cohesiveness and perceived social loafing.

We find that perceived social loafing significantly decreases with the use of a mixed-incentive reward structure in a virtual team environment. We also find that social loafing decreases with the use of a richer technology medium in a virtual team environment. Additionally we find that perceived social loafing differs between males and females. We provide evidence that females perceive more social loafing when there is not a mixed-incentive scheme. We do not find satisfaction or team cohesion is increased with either a bonus scheme or richer technology or differs between males and females.

The remainder of the paper is organized in five sections. In Section 2, we discuss background and develop the hypotheses and in Section 3, we discuss the participants', task and experimental design. In Section 4, we present the statistical analyses and in Section 5 we discuss the results. Finally, in the last section we discuss conclusions and limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research.

2. Background and hypotheses

To understand the issue of teambuilding, it is important to first understand what characteristics embody a *team*. In their book *The Wisdom of Teams*, Katzenbach and Smith (1999) distinguish between *working groups* and *teams*. Working groups are people who come together to work on a common task;

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