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The Role of Brokers and Social Identities in the Development of Capabilities in Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

While organizations are increasingly relying on global virtual teams (GVTs) to carry out knowledge intensive activities, the understanding of how GVTs develop capabilities is still limited. We explore how GVTs adapt routines and build capabilities, and the role played by brokers and social identities in this process. We interviewed 49 professionals working in fifteen GVTs based in Europe, India, and US, and operating in IT and engineering consulting companies. Our multi-level grounded model highlights that, while brokers help in the creation of mutual knowledge, they reduce the accuracy of perceptions about distant co-workers. Mutual knowledge, combined with limited accuracy of perceptions, diminishes the need to adapt team routines over time. The negative effect of brokers on the creation of team capabilities is reduced when individual professional identities trigger the search for more accurate perceptions of distant colleagues and clients with the objective of adapting team routines and performing more stimulating work. On top of this, organizational identity further enables the process of adaptation of team routines. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical implications on the interplay between operational and social processes in GVTs and team capabilities, as well as practical implications for designing and managing GVTs.

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly rely on global virtual teams (GVTs), within and across organizations, to conduct knowledge intensive activities, such as R&D, engineering, IT consulting, and marketing (Manning et al., 2008; Mattarelli and Tagliaventi, 2015). Recent academic studies and industrial reports have shown that distributed work, virtual teams, and global virtual teams are becoming commonplace and are indeed changing the nature of work as we typically think of as organizational scholars (Cramton and Hinds, 2014; Gilson et al., 2015; Global Workplace Analytics, 2016; Grant et al., 2010; Hinds et al., 2011; International Data Corporation, 2011; Witchalls et al., 2010). For instance, a report by the Economist discloses that 78% of European managers work in virtual

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teams, many of which are globally distributed, and that, for 49% of European companies, virtual teams have evolved as a natural way to carry out everyday tasks and processes (Witchalls et al., 2010). Additionally, the use of global virtual teams has become a central feature of the organization of work in many companies, be they large multinationals or small born-global start-ups (Ale Ebrahim et al., 2009). Organizations use GVTs to obtain superior performance, while taking advantage of cost differentials across countries and getting access to global expertise (Caya et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, the two very distinctive features of a GVT, i.e., the geographic dispersion of its members and the intensive use of collaborative technology like email or Instant Messaging, pose serious challenges to the attainment of high levels of performance. These challenges are related both to team social processes (e.g., increased conflict, reduced team identification, lack of mutual understanding and familiarity, Cramton, 2001; Hinds and Cramton, 2014; Hinds and Mortensen, 2005; O'Leary and Mortensen, 2009) and to operational processes (e.g., increased coordination costs, reduced knowledge sharing, Mattarelli and Gupta, 2009; Mortensen and Neeley, 2012). The literature on distributed work agrees that, when compared to co-localized teams, GVTs find it more difficult to create common repertoires of norms, rules, protocols, and routines. At the same time, though, codification of routines has been found to be strongly associated to superior performance of GVTs, and best practices for managing GVTs advocate the importance of defining, sharing, and codifying norms and routines (Kotlarsky et al., 2014; Mattarelli and Tagliaventi, 2010). Even though literature has underlined the relevance and drawbacks of defining routines in GVTs, we still know surprisingly little about *the process* through which GVTs construct and reconstruct routines over time, i.e. develop a specific team capability related to adaptation. A few studies have delved into the role of brokers in relation to routines and practices in GVTs. Brokers are appointed to GVTs with the aim of sustaining and promoting the use of common practices and routines (Kotlarsky et al., 2008). The literature tends to focus on their positive impact on team outcomes in terms of coordination and knowledge sharing, but we know little about their impact on the development of team capabilities (e.g. Baba et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Johri, 2008). The objective of this paper is to better understand how the team capability of adapting and revising routines is built in global virtual teams, and how brokers affect this process.

In order to investigate the impact of brokers on the development of team capabilities, we interviewed 49 professionals working in five different IT and engineering consulting companies and conducted case studies on fifteen GVTs engaged in offshore projects between India, US, and Europe. We adopted the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to collect and analyze our data. The multi-level grounded model that we developed underscores the negative impact of brokers on the development of team capabilities and reveals how social identities (professional identity and organizational identity) intervene in this process. Specifically, it shows how the use of brokers in GVTs favors the development of mutual knowledge (i.e. knowledge that members of the GVT share and are aware they share), but reduces the accuracy of perceptions of team members and clients. With accuracy of perceptions we refer to a *detailed* knowledge that team members hold about who distant colleagues are and what they do within their organizations. Increased mutual knowledge combined with limited accuracy of perceptions have negative implications for the development of team capabilities. This negative effect is overcome when team members' professional identity triggers their search for more accurate perceptions of others, in order to change existing team routines with the objective of gaining better work, such as more knowledge intensive and challenging activities. Finally, our model shows how organizational identity acts as an enabler of this process.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: we first review the broad literature on capabilities in teams. We then zoom in the specific literature on global virtual teams that has touched upon the issues on capabilities and focus on the role of brokers in distributed collaborations. Next, we present the methodology for the case studies that we conducted in GVTs of five organizations engaged in knowledge intensive work. Our empirical evidence allows us to build a grounded model and a set of propositions that we discuss in terms of theoretical and practical contributions. In particular, the paper provides a better understanding of operational and social processes in GVTs, furthers our knowledge on team capabilities, and provides practical implications for building and maintaining successful distributed teams.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Team capabilities and the adaptation of routines

Studies on organizational capabilities have pointed to the importance of not only building routines, but also continuously revising and adapting them to fit external changing conditions as well as internal mutable needs (e.g., Felin et al., 2012; Turner and Fern, 2012). While we are aware that the ability to define, share, and modify routines is necessary for GVTs, we need to extend our understanding of how the ability to intervene on routines develops in distributed work settings. GVTs operating in project-based organizations, such as IT and engineering consulting companies, often face changing conditions and develop their own capabilities to handle contingencies (Kotlarsky et al., 2014). In some cases, GVTs can rely on the existing repertoire of organizational capabilities, but often they need to refine existing routines to match them with the specific contingencies that they are addressing. The literature on organizational capabilities provides the first reference to understand how capabilities can develop and be enacted in the organization, and, more specifically, in GVTs.

Since a capability is 'a high level routine (or collection of routines) that, together with its implementing input flows, confers upon an organization's management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type' (Winter, 2003, p. 991), routines can be considered as the building blocks of capabilities (Eggers and Kaplan, 2013). Routines are the repositories where experience is stored (Nelson and Winter, 1982) and are then assembled into capabilities (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003; Laamanen and Wallin,

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