

**Virtual Projects across Borders and Cultures:
How Does Culture Impact Virtual Teamwork?**

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Introduction

The number of project groups where project participants are not situated at the same location is increasing exponentially. When project members represent different organisations, time zones and countries and have to depend on electronic media to communicate, we are talking about virtual project groups. Such electronically based, often international projects are increasingly the reality for many people working in projects.

While the technology binding virtual project team members together is developing rapidly, the skills and competencies for leading and participating in virtual projects are lagging behind. In our consultancy work we are noticing an increasing number of problems and sometimes conflicts arising because project groups have not yet learned how to manage virtual project tasks internationally.

In a survey carried out in mid-1999 among Danish companies using the virtual project work form, the following areas were mentioned as the most problematical: “we”-feeling, group identity, cultural barriers, effectiveness and communication. The interesting part is that these problem areas are interrelated. They illustrate how challenging leadership is for getting the virtual project groups to function – and to function optimally.

Achieving a common understanding of and mutual acceptance of project management principles in the virtual project group – which may be multicultural as well – is even more difficult to achieve than in a “common” project, where communication and interaction among project members takes place primarily face-to-face.

Project members may be separated by many thousands of miles and by several time zones. Maybe there will be a unified “internet time” sometime in the future which will erase time differences, but cultural diversity arising from wide geographical distribution will certainly not be eliminated soon. We must learn to live with the fact that people have different perceptions of how a project should be shaped, lead and controlled.

When project members do not meet “in passing” and share small items of verbal and nonverbal information, but instead are dependent on electronic media for their communication, agreements made under such “virtual” conditions have even greater weight than usual.

What is special with virtual project groups?

Many persons have worked for a long time in distributed workplaces, but virtual work takes on a different meaning when business processes are predominantly electronic. New technology is not just a faster way to carry out what we did earlier. New technology has the capability to transform our work and to create a significant degree of added value.

Getting the technology that binds the virtual project group together to function is not the main challenge. The most difficult challenge is to create a joint project environment (joint technology base, common administrative and economic methods, common understanding of project management principles). The challenge is to uncover and to understand how cultural differences influence the application of such project management tools in a multicultural environment. Planning tools, project start-up techniques, in fact all project management tools, are inadequate if they do not take into consideration how they can and will be understood and utilized.

Cultural diversity increases with virtual projects

Virtual project groups are characterized by even more diversity than traditional projects. Firstly, virtual technologies allow more parties than would be the case in traditional projects to be involved in the work (for example, suppliers, consultants, stakeholder representatives). Secondly, the technology allows more people to “take the floor” and to receive or to acquire relevant information.

The special challenge lies in creating and maintainng *at a distance* relations among such participants, wherever they may be.

It is important to be conscious of what advantages (and disadvantages) exist in face-to-face communication, for it is precisely these advantages (and disadvantages) that disappear in virtual work. Being dependent on electronic media, one becomes suddenly limited to one or two dimensional communication (audio and/or visual). We lose the input from the other senses that we normally use to interpret what is going on around us. No longer meeting face-to-face at meetings, at the coffee machine, in the cafeteria or socially, we lose the possibility of using input from all the senses to match and therefore to check the validity of the verbal and nonverbal message.

The virtual culture

The virtual workplace is not only a meeting place between different actors in a virtual project group where each player possesses a unique cultural background. The virtual project creates its own culture.

Virtual project work as a work form builds seemingly on set of values specific to virtual project groups. The most important of these values are:

- predominantly verbal communication (low context) in contrast to nonverbal (high context).
- predominantly explicit communication (in contract to implicit).
- orientation to output (=results) in contrast to an orientation to process .

These are values which match North American and northern European cultures.

In addition is the issue of trust. It is more difficult with this electronically based one- or two-way communication to build and maintain personal relations and mutual trust. Paradoxically, however, virtual project work requires as a prerequisite a high level of mutual trust among the partners.

As we all know *structure x process = effectiveness*.

When one unconsciously forgets that culture actually influences both structure and process, also in the virtual project group, then one exposes oneself to avoidable pitfalls.

Examples of where culture has made virtual project work more difficult

As virtual project groups become more and more common, more and more examples arise, especially internationally, when culture has made virtual project work more difficult.

Example 1:

The Danish members of a Danish-American project team were completely taken aback and angered by the overly casual – perhaps incidental? – message which came from an American colleague to a highly positioned employee in the Danish company just one week before an important meeting. The sender had used the term “significant others”, a slang expression which was not understood by the Danes. Not only that, the request had come so late in the preparations of the meeting that had been going on for some months. But also the – according to the Danes – direct tone of the email, together with the fact that the Danish company invested a lot of effort into meeting the needs of the “significant others”, only to experience upon arrival of the American team that the request was *not* about board members but about wives.

Possible pitfalls:

- *how informal can one allow oneself to be?*
- *different perceptions of priority*
- *different perceptions of time*
- *what information “belongs” to which level in the organisation?*
- *how to solve conflicts arising in the virtual enviroment?*

Example 2:

An American company with a subsidiary in Denmark often uses email for quick messages back and forth across the Atlantic. According to the Danish project members, these emails, as they are formulated, appear direct and impolite – a constant source of irritation. The American attitude is “Why waste time in high tech messages replicating letter writing technology of the 19th century?”

Possible pitfalls:

- *different perceptions of how an electronic medium should and can be used*
- *“direct” = aggressive?*
- *how can/should one show politeness, but still be effective?*

Example 3:

During a video conference it can be difficult to judge who the important players are. Maybe this is not so important for Scandinavians where broad delegation is common, but it can be very important in the Asian countries, where hierarchy and relative position are crucial.

Possible pitfalls:

- *different perceptions of position, responsibility and delegation*
- *who should take the lead or be in charge?*
- *who can take decisions?*

Which aspects of culture are interesting for virtual projects?

Regardless of whether one is concerned with virtual project groups or in general with the interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds, there are a number of important leadership issues: (1) creating a common understanding of what is behind the words used, (2) awareness of what motivates the different players, (3) skills to discern, to manage and to overcome hidden stereotypes, and (4) awareness of one's own cultural prejudices and preferences.

In any intercultural situation, there are several elements that play a role: the players (mutual status, age, gender...), the nonverbal communication, the verbal communication, (personal) territory issues, assumptions on what is going on, and lastly the “script”, eg. *what* players *expect* to be said or done *when*. All of these elements are affected by the virtual nature of electronically linked project groups, especially so when the project members have markedly different cultural backgrounds, values and preferences.

It is important to be aware of when and how culture plays a role – and to be capable of managing it. This means at the time of project start-up, that it is important to use time and energy on clarifying and agreeing on joint norms for cooperation and judging how the chosen electronic medium for the cooperation will work culturally. During the virtual project work, it means that all project members and especially the project manager must be capable of seeing and understanding cultural factors in unexpected reactions, delays and “disconnects.”

What items should be covered by a “Netiquette”?

Don't believe that all project members have the same attitudes to how work should be tackled and how communication should take place! There are plenty of examples of face-to-face project meetings that show that not even in traditional project groups is it a good idea to leap over this important phase of the creation of a project team.

Some examples of norms that need to be agreed upon during the start-up of a virtual project are:

1. Language

It could be that English has been chosen as the working language, but there are of course many variations of the English language. Even within the English language group, just as between closely related languages like Swedish and Danish, the same words can have different meanings. Take Indian English for example: “I have just fired my secretary” does not mean that the secretary has been dismissed. It means simply “I have just bawled her out”.

It could be that it is impossible to agree ahead of time to what all words will mean. But one *can* agree that everyone has the “right” to check what the meaning is without the others in the group losing patience. The chance for misunderstandings can also be reduced by agreeing that everyone uses simple English-as-a-second-language (ESL) vocabulary and simple sentences. One can also try to avoid difficult words, slang and direct translations of phrases from one's own language.

2. When to “speak” directly?

All societies have different forms of showing politeness. Should one use titles (“Herr Doktor Professor”)? Is it insulting to use first names (“Dear John”)? Scandinavians expect that concerning

work issues one should speak directly and to-the-point. But this can be particularly insulting in project situations with people from other countries. In other situations, we Scandinavians feel insulted by the Americans' direct manner.

3. *How short should the message be?*

There are different norms different places in the world about how brief one should be. In the US one learns to be structured, clear and concise in one's messages. At the other end of the scale is India, where it is important to include all background information in order to give sufficient contextual information for understanding the main message.

4. *Trust: build up relationships and trust first!*

Mutual trust is the alpha omega for all groups, but perhaps even more important in virtual groups. It is important for the project leadership and project colleagues to agree on the time and place for strengthening the interpersonal relations among the involved parties as the foundation for mutual trust. This must receive high priority!! An occasional face-to-face meeting where there is space for socializing, or personal pages on the project website where members can tell about themselves or share jokes are possible solutions. Trust is not two-dimensional! It requires a *feeling* for the other.

5. *Can feelings be shown? How?*

The extent to which feelings are shown in the team or are expressed verbally is also something for which there are varying norms around the world. In Italy one should flavor one's speaking and writing in order to be trustworthy. In Scandinavia it is important to have control over one's feelings in order to be considered trustworthy and professional. In Asia feelings are well-guarded – but that does not mean that they don't have them! Virtual project members must be especially capable of judging when feelings are at play, and capable of getting the group to agree on how the group will manage these feelings in a trustworthy way.

6. *Managing virtual meetings in individualistic and collectivistic societies*

There are many implications, when virtual project work takes place between persons from individualistic and collectivistic societies.¹

Individualistic societies, for example, prioritize *what* you do and *what* you know. Collectivistic societies weight *who* you are and *whom* you know. Therefore in individualistic societies it is facts, data and deadlines that gets work done, while in collectivistic societies it is relations, connections and roles that create progress. This difference is important to consider when the project group must plan its work or when an achievement must be recognized or rewarded.

Another important consideration is how decisions are taken. A project manager from an individualistic society most likely expects that he/she can make decisions without further. In a collectivist society, however, decisions are formally taken collaboratively by the group, and a spokesman, as an individual person, cannot modify them. It can be dangerous for cooperation if "individualistic" virtual project members insist that a "collectivist" project manager personally take his/her own decisions or change decisions.

A third aspect can be mentioned: we – from individualistic countries – consider our email addresses to be our personal postboxes, and emails addressed to ourselves are regarded as personal property. In collectivistic countries, for example Japan, an email may be "communal" property. Emails addressed to an individual may be received not by the individual but by the department. Can the content of your emails survive public exposure?

7. *The meaning of silence*

The absence of response, especially with email, can at the minimum irritate. In Denmark we would reason that the receiving person is either out of the office on business or that the matter apparently has low priority. In other countries lack of response can, on the contrary, mean high priority: the longer

¹According to Geert Hofstede, collectivistic societies are closely knit social systems, in which the individual obtains his identity from the primary group (family, clan or organisation) in return for his total loyalty to the group. In individualistic societies, the individual attains his identity from own achievements and he is expected to take care of close family only. Scandinavia and USA are individualistic societies, while Latin America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia are collectivistic.

one is made to wait, the higher the priority. Silence can also mean agreement – or the opposite. What have you agreed on in *your* project?

8. *Who should receive copies?*

The use of email allows for a wide distribution of information. It is easy to inform many people, maybe to a level of overinformation. But whom should be informed should be given serious consideration in the project, because hierarchy means different things in different countries. In countries with flat hierarchies, for example in Scandinavia, there is an expectation that many *at many levels* should be kept informed of progress in the project. In countries with high hierarchies, who is on the “cc” list – or who is not – has considerable political significance. In France there is apparently a norm that dictates that many people are copied *upwards*, while only a select few are copied *downwards* in the system. Should there be agreement about how to use blind copies?

9. *How and when should conflicts be resolved, when they arise?*

Conflicts are very difficult in virtual project groups. They are more difficult to detect in time when nonverbal signals are missing. Conflicts are often grounded in differing and insufficiently matched expectations to how work should be approached. Because the group meets virtually and therefore relatively seldom (where it is therefore impossible to clear the air at the coffee machine), dissatisfaction is spread and discussed backwards in the organisation, that is in a safe environment where people share one’s expectations and norms. The project leader must be capable of picking up the signals and of solving the conflicts, perhaps via telephone, perhaps by arranging for the involved parties to meet face-to-face. One should keep in mind that in certain societies a third party or mediator is a preferred way to solve conflicts.

10.

This incomplete list is only a start. You are invited to add your own examples to the list of norms that need to be agreed upon at the start of a virtual project.

Remember that the exercise of achieving agreement on norms cannot be regarded as finished after the start-up. Group norms need to be taken up later as well for reflection and possible revision.

Conclusion

It is important for virtual project members, and especially the project manager, to sharpen their awareness and consciousness of work processes that do not flow naturally, misunderstandings that surface (or that are not spoken about openly but only whispered about), unfulfilled expectations, and most of all, loss of mutual trust.

To manage cultural differences requires openness, diplomacy and courage, and especially self-awareness. To manage cultural differences also means the capability of overcoming the weaknesses that arise with virtuality, as well as the capability to optimize the advantages that virtuality can offer for projects functioning across cultural boundaries.

Selected Literature

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