Virtual Group
Strategic Decision Making
Using Structured Conflict
and Consensus Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Do procedures that improve face-to-face decision meetings also improve virtual “meetings”? Might the effectiveness of such procedures improve with practice? This longitudinal experiment investigated the efficiency, effectiveness and group member perceptions of dialectical inquiry (DI) and constructive consensus (CC) approaches to strategic decision making in a virtual (distributed) Computer-Mediated-Communications (CMC) environment. There were no differences between DI and CC groups in terms of decision effectiveness. However, this result has not been unusual in CMC research. DI groups had significantly higher perceived depth of evaluation than CC groups. CC groups reported greater decision acceptance and willingness to work together again than DI groups. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for Group Support Systems research and design in the era of the World Wide Web.

Keywords: computer-mediated communications; decision making; group decision support systems; structured conflict

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, managers and professional information workers are communicating via the Internet and internal corporate networks, using “groupware” for both synchronous multi-media “meetings” and virtual (largely text-based, anytime/anywhere) discussions and project management. These are used both to support distributed task forces and project teams within existing organizations and to create temporary or permanent “virtual organizations” to take advantage of new oppor-
tunities in electronic commerce (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Mowshowitz, 1997; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). What kinds of structures, tools and interaction processes work best with these new media? The availability of new technologies is outstripping our knowledge about how best to use them. We know that the medium of communication does affect process and outcomes of group interaction (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Hiltz, Turoff, & Johnson, 1989; Priem, Harrison, & Muir, 1995; Rice, 1984). It is very likely that group procedures that have proven effective in face-to-face (FtF) decision-making and project meetings will not have the same effects in computer-mediated meetings, but without empirical comparisons, we do not know.

Previous research on FtF groups indicates that groups that try to reach consensus on a choice decision without following any specific procedures often have impaired outcomes (process losses) relative to the efforts of others following specific procedures (Steiner, 1972). These include problems resulting from unequal participation, a failure to generate and explore alternative solutions before reaching a final choice and a lack of critical examination of ideas.

Group interactions, such as brainstorming and Nominal Group Technique, and structured conflict procedures such as Dialectical Inquiry (DI) have been shown to decrease process losses and improve the outcomes of FtF decision-making groups (Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Regan, 1986; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). For example, several studies in the field of organizational strategic decision making have demonstrated that DI and similar structured conflict approaches, such as “devil’s advocate” procedures, can improve decision quality (Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Mitroff, Emshoff, & Kilmann, 1979; Schweiger, et al., 1986, 1989).

Unfortunately, researchers cannot confidently generalize these findings from studies of FtF groups to groups supported by computer-based Group Support Systems (GSS). This limitation is especially notable with respect to distributed or virtual (different time/different place) GSS computing environments. This is important given that organizations are migrating from traditional FtF communication and decision making to electronically mediated interactions, such as e-mail and groupware (Powell et al., 2004). In addition, businesses are becoming more globally oriented, have flatter hierarchies and are utilizing more cross-functional teams, all of which is placing tremendous demands on decision makers’ ability to coordinate dispersed activities and improve the effectiveness of the decisions (Chidambaram & Jones, 1993). The questions for decision makers are:

1. Can conflict-generating techniques be effectively utilized in a virtual CMC environment?
2. Will performance improve with experience?

This study is the first to examine whether structured conflict procedures are superior to consensus-oriented procedures in a virtual communication environ-
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