Chapter XXXIX
An International Virtual Office
Communication Plan

Lei Meng
Texas Tech University, USA
Robert Schafer
Texas Tech University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to define a plan for an international virtual office by exploring the problems that hamper communication within a virtual office. Four factors that contribute to miscommunication are explored: linguistics, culture, laws and regulations, and technology. Policies of practice are then offered to mitigate these factors, help increase the productivity, and avoid communication problems, personnel conflicts, and legal liability. Last, different stages of office evolution are discussed and the future trend of office is explored. The purpose of this chapter is to help establish a successful international virtual office as the virtual office is becoming the future trend of the business environment.

INTRODUCTION

As worldwide connectivity through the Internet becomes pervasive, more companies are adopting virtual organizational structures that allow teams of workers to operate across geographic boundaries and apart from a local, central office. More professional workers find themselves members of virtual teams “consisting of members in remote locations who work together primarily through computer-mediated communication” (Robey, Huoy, & Powers, 2000, p. 51). Members of virtual teams often collaborate to construct documentation for technical information products such as computer software, customer service, and pharmaceuticals.

Practitioners of technical communication anticipate that they will soon work in a multicultural, global work environment (Hill, 2006; Murphy, 2007; Nesbitt & Bagley-Woodward, 2006), but are uncertain as to how to adapt current skills and practices within a traditional office environment to a new context: “the international virtual office” (St. Amant, 2001, p. 80). This international virtual office is comprised of the following components:
Virtual team in which members of various functions work together to bring their respective skills and perspectives to a common work output (Robey et al., 2000, p. 51)

Virtual team consisting of people who are assembled to accomplish a task via information and telecommunication (Anawati & Craig, 2006, p. 45)

Virtual teams that work on a specific project that has a beginning and an end (Anawati & Craig, 2006, p. 45)

Virtual team members that will most likely consist of persons from different geographical locations and cultures that operate within the umbrella of one company or virtual organization (Robey et al., 2000, p. 52)

Virtual office or work environment that is shared by team members (Harrison, Wheeler, & Whitehead, 2004, p. 57)

Online communication across office contexts has helped to change the traditional concept of the office to include coworkers from varied national and cultural backgrounds. This new telecommuting work environment has the potential to increase productivity while reducing cost (Fritz, Watson, Narasimhan, & Hyeun-Suk, 1998, p. 8) through content sharing (Hill, 2006, p. 12) mediated by collaborative technology (Nesbitt & Bagley-Woodward, 2006, p. 28) resulting in lower overhead.

Although an international virtual office environment may promise low-cost benefits, this new workscape also presents unique challenges. Problems that can hamper communication—and consequently, productivity—in the international virtual office generally originate from factors in four primary areas: linguistics, culture, laws and regulations, and technology. This chapter first analyzes the influences of those aspects that might cause confusions or problems in international virtual offices, and then, based on the analysis, it provides a series of policies that could help us avoid those potential problems in international virtual offices.

**BACKGROUND**

**Linguistic Factors**

The fact that individuals from different cultures usually speak different languages presents a basic challenge within the international virtual office because communication among team members is primarily completed through use of spoken and written human language. Without a “universal language” that all members of the international virtual office can understand, communication cannot take place (Kilpatrick, 1984, p. 36). Fortunately, English is helping to bridge the communication gap because it is becoming a global language (Thrush, 1993, p. 273).

Even though English is often used in the international virtual office, linguistic factors will still present unique challenges for team members. Edmond Weiss (1998) demonstrates that even if universal writing practices for simplifying English are used, documents can contain lapses such as “wordiness, ostentation, clumsy links, tense problems, jargon, nominalization, and passives” (p. 255). Although simplified English is intended to be univocal, univocal language may be a barrier to satisfactory communication between the Western and the Asian language speaking people in particular (Weiss, 1998, p. 258), and lead to stereotyping and condescending tolerance (Weiss, 1998, p. 260).

Kirk St. Amant suggests that English-as-a-second-language (ESL) speakers may not understand all of the “nuances and intricate uses of the language” (St. Amant, 2001, p. 82) for reasons such as “limited access to native English speakers, limited access to good teaching materials and effective and competent instructors, or the nature of a given educational system” (St. Amant, 2001, p. 82). In addition, English has different dialects, which may cause misunderstanding about the information being conveyed (Thrush, 1993, p. 273). Considering these issues of encultured and embedded knowledge (Williams, 2006, p. 591), ESL team members may misunderstand some information.
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