Chapter V

Success in The International Virtual Office

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ABSTRACT
The advent of technologies such as company e-mail systems and corporate intranets has expanded the office to include co-workers from various national and cultural backgrounds. This new development means that certain deep-seated cultural factors can affect interoffice communications in the new workplace. This essay presents some of the more prevalent cultural “problem” areas that can affect international and intercultural communication in the new virtual workplace. This essay also provides a series of tips or strategies that can facilitate effective intercultural communication in the new atmosphere of the virtual office area as well as overview certain resources that can facilitate communication in this international and multicultural environment.

INTRODUCTION
Revolutions in electronic communication are constantly changing how individuals think about “the office.” The office was once a physical structure, and communicating with colleagues often meant wandering over to their cubicles to ask a question or to discuss an issue. Now, with technologies such as company e-mail systems and corporate intranets, the office has expanded to include co-workers from various national and cultural back-
grounds and who are stationed in various locations around the globe. Together these individuals create a new kind of “virtual office” (a network of co-workers connected by nothing more than various on-line communication technologies) that is becoming increasingly common in the business world of the 21st century.

While colleagues in the virtual office might use similar technologies to communicate and often use a common language (primarily English), there are still deep-seated cultural factors that can affect the quality of interoffice communications in this new workplace. These differences often occur independent from technology or language, yet they can be among the most subtle and problematic factors contributing to confusion and miscommunication. For this reason, the following essay will not examine the technological differences that can exist among various regions or various nations. Rather, this essay will examine some of the more prevalent cultural “problem” areas that can affect communication in the new virtual office. Also, as many individuals new to intercultural communication might not be aware that certain cultural differences exist, the following essay focuses on heightening reader awareness of these issues and on providing strategies for overcoming these problems rather than engaging in a deep, academic examination of these problem areas.

**LITERATURE REVIEW/ SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW**

Different cultures have unique expectations concerning information presentation, and these can vary depending on the specific cultures represented and on the topic of the interaction. For example, individuals from different cultures often structure messages differently despite similar linguistic backgrounds (e.g., British and New Zealand English vs. US English) (Driskill, 1996). Similarly, individuals from different cultures often use different strategies for proving a point or for persuading an audience. In fact, manuscripts written by German or French authors often present broad conclusions unsupported by data while British and American authors usually use extensive data analysis but present few conclusions (Hofstede, 1997).

Cultural expectations can also occur at a more micro level, for different cultures can have different expectations of sentence length, and these expectations can affect how individuals from a certain culture perceive the importance or the credibility of a given message. As Ulijn and Strother (1995) have
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