Chapter IX

The Strategic Use of “Distance” Among Virtual Team Members: A Multi-Dimensional Communication Model

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ABSTRACT

Distance, in the context of virtual teams, has traditionally been treated as an unproblematic, in fact positive, by-product of work practices mediated by information and communication technologies. Research has largely overlooked the notion of distance and its relationship to virtual team work practices and digital telecommunications technologies. Explored in this chapter is the nature of distance by investigating perceptions of “distance” among teleworkers and addressing how virtual team members strategically use the distance enabled by telecommunications technologies to manage a variety of organizational practices. Interviews with 46 distance workers across 10 industries, making up 17 virtual teams, found that members conceptualize distance across three important dimensions: distance and
emotion, distance and identity, and distance and communication strategies. We discuss each of these dimensions and propose moving from a notion of distance as a mere outcome of the use of information and communication technologies, to a reconceptualization of it as a multidimensional construct created and maintained through communication practices.

INTRODUCTION

One quality of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that has been taken as straightforward is their ability to support working at a distance. The concept of distance has been understood, in a fairly unproblematic way, to mean physical distance: The ability to work from some place other than the office. ICTs were argued to allow increased physical distance by decreasing “functional” distance — that is, workers can access information and communicate with colleagues more easily and more quickly than without the use of such technologies (Heaton, 1998; O’Mahony & Barley, 1999; Waisbord, 1998). Accordingly, our typical understanding of virtual teams revolves primarily around the notion of distance work; members do not have to be physically copresent in order to accomplish shared tasks. Yet, this view centers primarily on the capabilities of the technology to transmit information. Intuitively, we know that distance is a richer concept than what is presented in this conceptualization. In an important sense, distance is perceived more than it is objectively measured. We “feel” more or less distant from others or from our places of work. Thus, distance is tied to the issue of “connection.” As such, distance is an important organizational and management concern.

Distance, in the context of virtual teams, was traditionally treated as an unproblematic, in fact, positive, by-product of work practices mediated by ICTs (DeSanctis & Monge, 1998). Accordingly, the notion of distance and its relationship to work practices and digital telecommunications technologies was largely overlooked by researchers of virtual teams as a fundamental concept for teamwork (O’Mahony & Barley, 1999). Explored in this chapter is the nature of distance by investigating perceptions of “distance” among teleworkers and addressing how virtual team members strategically use the distance enabled by telecommunications technologies to manage a variety of organizational practices.

DISTANCE WORK AND TECHNOLOGY

Fluid organizational forms emerging over the past decade ushered in new arrangements and expectations for work (DeSanctis & Fulk, 1999; DeSanctis & Monge, 1998; Keen, 1990; McPhee & Poole, 2001). A “new economy” evolved in which “postentrepreneurial” professionals adopt “boundaryless careers”