The Role of Media Richness in Information Technology-Supported Communication in Group Cohesion, Agreeability, and Performance

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ABSTRACT

Organizations have been faced with social/economic pressure to utilize IT and to facilitate communication via technological modes. The communications that are dependent on media richness are affected by individual user characteristics. The individual users who participate in group projects must communicate and ultimately can have different performance and cohesion outcomes based on the mode of communication used. Under the media richness theory, a group’s cohesion and performance are impacted by technological modes of communication. Additionally, groups often experience varying levels of individual member agreeability, which affect cohesion and performance. This study identifies significant differences between groups, using specific media to communicate cohesion, the change in cohesion, agreeability, and performance.

Keywords: group cohesion; information technology; media richness

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, organizations have faced increased pressure to utilize information technology (IT) to expand markets, to support increased communication among constituents, to streamline organizational decision-making, and to improve employee productivity. Unfortunately, the results are contradictory as to the success IT has
had in helping organizations achieve these goals. On the one hand, several studies have reported beneficial returns on investment with the aforementioned implementation of information technology (Bourquard, 2004; Chienting Jen-Hwa Hu & Hsinchun, 2004; Dehning & Richardson, 2002; Hinton & Kaye, 1996; McGrath & Schneider, 2000; Violino, 1998; Willcocks & Lester, 1991). On the other hand, research also seems to suggest that technology can sink an organization when IT is not in alignment with the strategic goals of the organization (Arlotto & Oakes, 2003; Hinton & Kaye, 1996; PITAC, 1999; Violino, 1998; Willcocks & Lester, 1991).

Adding to this dilemma, the marketplace has been turning to global expansion, becoming more demographically diverse and relying more on the use of workgroups and teams (Stough, Eom & Buckenmyer, 2000). These work teams historically have performed in homogenous settings and have met primarily face-to-face (FTF). These teams typically used little technology to interact. Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford (1992) found that organizations that use teams more often have a positive outcome in decision-making, employee trust, and employee tenure. Considering the advances in communication media over the past 20 years, information technology has become a part of the everyday operations of most businesses. The requirement of the employee to use this technology has become essential to organizational success. With the organizational dependence on the employee to use information technology plus the increased use of teams in the workplace, organizations may fail to provide workers with the support and training needed to develop cohesive groups resulting in improved performance and member satisfaction (Sarbaugh-Thompson & Feldman, 1998; Yoo & Alavi, 2001).

Several studies have concluded that teams that communicate successfully have had positive team performance (Rice & Monkarsh, 1979; Tuckman & Jensen, 1997; Zaccaro & Lowe, 1988). However, the independent variables considered in the aforementioned research vary greatly and seem to show inconsistency in identifying indicators that could be used to help with the implementation of technology that supports team performance. This study looks at FTF and virtual teams, the personality trait of agreeability, and the impact of specific communication technology on cohesion and performance. We use the media richness theory to facilitate our literature review and to guide the development of our hypotheses.

**COHESION**

Through a meta-analysis of the group dynamics literature, Forsyth (1990, 1999) suggested that the key to group processes was cohesion. In these two studies, Forsyth noted that cohesion was the “glue” that holds a group together and that cohesion was the “strength” that bonds and links groups together. Forsyth (1999) further suggested that cohesive groups possess the common
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