Personality, Emotion and Judgment in Virtual Environments: A Theoretical Framework

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ABSTRACT

As organizations become increasingly reliant on distributive technologies, the processes that underpin the effective functioning of employees in virtual environments require systematic examination. This article provides a theoretical framework for studying personality, emotion and judgment in virtual environments. The communication media characteristics, social context, and individual traits and states are presented to portray the dynamic nature of judgment formation in a virtual environment. We argue that media characteristics, combined with personality, motivation and emergent social contexts serve to shape emotions and resultant judgments. By integrating the Information Systems (IS) and Organizational Behavior/Psychology literatures, we chart a course for research examining personality, emotion and judgments, with implications for any distributed organization. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Communication; Emotion; Judgment; Personality; Virtual

INTRODUCTION

The global business environment poses many challenges and opportunities for organizations seeking to capitalize on human talent. It is now possible to work in a virtual environment, where co-workers are scattered across the globe. Virtual workers make important judgments that are informed by emotions, communication cues and norms different from those in face to face (FtF) interaction (Walther et al., 2005). While
few would quibble about the importance of timely and effective decision making in a fast paced, global business environment, little research attention has been paid to the role of personality, emotions and judgments in virtual environments. This article argues that by understanding judgments, and the processes that underlie their creation, organizations may be in a better position to help ensure decisions made in virtual environments are in the firm’s best interest.

This article uses well established theories from the Information Systems (IS) and Organizational Behavior/Psychology literatures to develop theoretically grounded propositions that examine the complex interplay between personality traits, state emotions, motivational systems, social context and media characteristics. At the heart of this examination is the desire to understand why certain people may experience the same objective information in very different ways, and how that may lead to subsequent differences in judgments about the encoding, sending and decoding (interpreting) of electronic messages. We believe that the primary contribution of this article is a theoretical framework and related set of propositions that use well established theories from the computer mediated communication (CMC) and psychology literatures to frame the field of inquiry into personality, emotion and judgments in virtual environments.

The geographic distribution of organizational members has resulted in the concepts of virtual work and virtual teams. A virtual team possesses all the qualities of a collocated team (task interdependence, common goals), but is geographically distributed and uses communication technology as the primary vehicle of coordination (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Virtuality can be considered as a continuum (Leenders et al., 2003) between completely co-located members who coordinate exclusively through FtF interactions (i.e., not at all virtual) to individual members who coordinate without ever meeting in person (i.e., completely virtual). When operating at, or near, the high end of the virtuality continuum, both senders and receivers of electronic communication have less information about remote workers, their actions, their experiences, their situations and context than if working in a collocated team (Cramton, 2001). In addition, both senders and receivers have information that is of lower quality than in collocated teams (Cramton, 2001) and there will be fewer established operating norms to guide behavior. When making judgments, communicators will fill in the informational and normative gaps and the manner in which they do so will be heavily influenced by individual differences including personality, motivation, and emotion. Because of the increased uncertainty, lower quality of information, and fewer norms associated with the CMC environment, it follows that individual differences may play stronger and different roles in influencing judgment formation than in collocated environments.

A wide variety of communication technologies are currently available to support virtual work including email, instant messaging, video conferencing, teleconferencing, groupware and decision support systems (Rice, 1993). Following many prominent Information Systems and Communications scholars (e.g., Hancock, 2004; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997; Panteli, 2002; Pauleen, 2003; Ramirez et al., 2002; Walther et al., 2005; Yoo & Alavi, 2004), this article focuses on text based CMC such as email and instant
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