Facilitating Computer-Supported Meetings: An Exploratory Comparison of U.S. and Mexican Facilitators

Fred Niederman
University of Baltimore

Facilitation is a key element in managing meetings particularly for groups using group support systems (GSS) (Ackermann, 1993). Research comparing adoption of group support systems, however, found differences in understandings and preferences based on cultural background (Ho, Raman, & Watson 1989; Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994). According to studies by Hofstede, Mexico and the U.S. differ markedly on three of four cultural dimensions. It would be expected that group facilitators in Mexico would differ from those in the U.S. in terms of what they see as (1) key elements to meeting success and as contributions and risks associated with use of GSS and (2) in their selection of tools and tasks for using GSS. Comparison of interview data gathered from 7 Mexican and 37 U.S. facilitators, showed similar views when aggregated into larger constructs. However, when examined in detail these also revealed a number of intriguing differences on the part of Mexican facilitators including (1) a greater concern with the physical environment, (2) greater concern with achieving expected rather than high quality results, (3) greater concern with group rather than individual facilitator skills, and (4) lesser concern for the influence of technology on group process. Both facilitator groups shared concerns regarding participant anxiety with technology and its effect on participation and the expectation of better meetings with careful planning and use of agendas. In interpreting these findings, the reader should note that some background characteristics, such as age and amount of experience leading meetings, differed between Mexican and U.S. facilitators. Facilitators also differed in their level of experience with GSS and with which GSS they were familiar.

Within organizations throughout the world people at times work in groups to accomplish tasks. Over the course of a project, a group may accomplish its work through parallel individual efforts and/or through face-to-face meetings where all or some subset of group members meet at the same time and place to communicate findings and opinions, to monitor progress, to render decisions, and to raise new questions. Groups may be comprised of culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous members. To the extent that culture is a shared mental concept which is never identical between two individuals in a group, there will be some commonalities and some differences. Where culture applies to general values and attitudes, norms refer to rules and/or procedures that individuals bring to meetings. Again there will be commonalities and divergences among members of a group.

In the U.S., there are numerous references to the difficulties of creating effectively run groups and meetings. Streams of research have focused on methods to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings by introducing interventions such as techniques for brainstorming, voting, devil’s advocacy and the like. An additional stream of research has looked at delivering these to groups through the use of computer-
based group support systems (GSS). Findings regarding the effectiveness of manual and computer-based interventions are mixed (Dennis & Gallupe, 1993). However, research into how groups operate and the search for methods to improve meeting outcomes continues.

For the most part, these issues and potential remedies have been introduced and tested in the U.S. It is not established that the same issues such as dissatisfaction with meetings, exists in other countries. Moreover, it is not clear that the purposes and/or norms associated in the U.S. with meetings correlate with those in other countries. Much can be learned about the norms and expectations regarding meetings among people of different countries by contrasting attitudes regarding the use of technologies to support meetings across cultures.

This study will present background information regarding meetings and the management or facilitation of meetings, the role of facilitation, and cross-cultural studies in MIS. Next it will present a set of research questions addressed in this paper, the research methods used, the results found, a discussion of the implications of the research for researchers and practitioners, and finally conclusions regarding limits of the study and research questions emergent from this exploratory work.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Past research on group support systems has been characterized by mixed results (Dennis & Gallupe, 1993). Desanctis & Poole (1994) note that, “...some researchers report that GSS use improves group consensus and decision quality, whereas others report the reverse (p. 123).” Field studies have generally drawn more positive conclusions than have controlled laboratory studies (Dennis, Heminger, Nunamaker, & Vogel, 1990; Dennis, Nunamaker, & Vogel, 1991). Case studies such as IRS (DeSanctis, Poole, Desharnais, & Lewis, 1991) and Texaco (DeSanctis, Poole, Dickson, & Jackson, 1993) have shown positive results for groups particularly those that enthusiastically embrace GSS as part of their group process. Testing under experimental conditions has also demonstrated some relationship between facilitation and meeting outcomes (Dickson, Lee-Partridge, & Robinson, 1993).

Facilitation quality is likely to be a key element in the success of both GSS and non-GSS meetings. Facilitation, when effectively supplied, provides structuring of the group agenda, provides an independent force in conflict surfacing and resolution, returns group members to the task at hand, and provides techniques and approaches to problem solving drawn from a large body of the facilitator’s expertise/experience (Niederman, Beise, & Beranek, 1996).

While using a GSS, a facilitator generally plans, coordinates, and directs the work of group members (Bostrom, Anson, & Clawson, 1991). Some commercial GSSs, such as GroupSystems/TeamFocus, require at least one facilitator to manage transmission and processing of information within the GSS during the meeting. Other GSSs, such as the SAMM (DeSanctis, Sambamurthy, & Watson, 1988) and SAGE (Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994), minimize the necessity, but allow the option, for human facilitation.

The role of facilitation is, therefore, likely to be more important in the GSS setting by (1) affecting the manner and degree to which the group embraces the capabilities of the new technology by providing training/assistance in GSS use, (2) shaping pathways which may not be intuitively obvious through its capabilities, and (3) adjusting the many process factors (e.g., encouraging or discouraging verbal participation as the situation demands) that may intervene between GSS inputs and group performance outcomes. Considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that facilitation in computer-supported meetings is a key success factor, even where facilitation is not required by the GSS (Daniels, Dennis, Hayes, Nunamaker, & Valacich, 1991; Grohowski, McGoff, Vogel, Martz, & Nunamaker, 1990; Vogel, 1990; Kraemer & King, 1988). However, GSS frameworks do not typically emphasize the facilitator as a significant independent variable (DeSanctis & Gallupe, 1987; Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1989).

Different patterns of usage and satisfaction with GSS have been shown to be based on different cultural background of group members (Ho, Raman, & Watson 1989; Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994). U.S. and Singaporean users of a GSS designed in the U.S. differed in their assessment of the value of the GSS, particularly in the area of perceived satisfaction. This is thought to be due to designers embedding their cultural assumptions regarding the purpose of meetings. When users do not share these assumptions, the system may force operation in an unusual, perhaps uncomfortable, manner or stimulate system use in unintended ways. The facilitator can act as a mediator between software built on alien or foreign assumptions and the goals of the group by building alternate pathways through its features, by explaining and teaching alternative approaches to the meeting, and/or by mediating other group process issues (e.g. conflict surfacing and resolution or participation).

Forcing inappropriate business strategies, including approaches to technical support of meetings, developed in one country onto those of another country can bring unanticipated and non-optimal results (Hofstede, 1983). Organizations display value systems including a component based on the organization's dominant nationality (Hofstede, 1985). Hofstede (1983, 1985) identified four dimensions of work-related values based on country mean score. These are: (1) power distance, level of acceptance of unequal distribution of power; (2) uncertainty avoidance, level of comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity; (3) individualism/collectivism, degree of preference for loosely or tightly knit social framework; and (4) masculinity/femininity, preference for achievement and assertiveness versus relationships and caring for the weak.

In spite of their physical proximity, the United States and Mexico have quite dissimilar cultural tendencies. In terms of Hofstede's dimensions, the U.S. and Mexico differ sharply in three areas. Mexico is higher in power distance and uncertainty avoidance while being lower in individualism. Both