Can I Trust You? 
Profile Elements that Inform First Impressions of Trustworthiness in Virtual Project Teams

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ABSTRACT
This explorative study identifies information elements that are commonly perceived as important to inform initial trustworthiness assessments of colleagues within virtual project teams. Collaboration in virtual project teams heavily relies on interpersonal trust, for which perceived trustworthiness is an important determinant. Knowing what information elements are used to form a first impression of trustworthiness, one can optimize the design of personal profiles so that they support trustworthiness assessments in virtual project teams. The authors reviewed various trust-requiring online environments to determine what elements were available through profile templates. A group of 226 students with experience in virtual project teams indicated the importance of the elements thus found for the formation of a first impression of trustworthiness. On the basis of the results obtained, the authors formulated recommendations for the design of personal identity profiles in groupware environments.

Keywords: Computer-Supported-Collaborative Environments, Design, Impression Formation, Online Identity, Profile, Trust, Trustworthiness, Virtual Project Team

INTRODUCTION
Virtual project teams are increasingly looked upon as a format for collaboratively solving complex and knowledge-intensive projects, within and between companies as well as in (inter)national non-profit organizations (Finholt, 2002; Perry, 2008). Several different notions of a virtual project team have been used in previous research (Dubé & Paré, 2004). Here we understand it to be an organizational form which is assembled on an as-needed basis for the duration of a project and staffed by two or more members across spatial, temporal, cultural and/or organizational boundaries (Hung et al., 2004;
Powell et al., 2004). In these types of projects teams members sporadically meet in person; they communicate via ICT (e.g., e-mail, chat, video-and/or audio-conferencing); they may not have a prior history of working together and may never meet in the future (Hung et al., 2004; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998).

It is broadly acknowledged that a positive level of interpersonal trust between team members within such virtual project teams benefits collaboration and communication (Corbitt et al., 2004; Gambetta, 1988; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa et al., 2004). In contrast, when there is a lack of trust, team members spend considerable time monitoring each other, backing-up or duplicating work, and documenting problems (Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006).

Perceived trustworthiness is an important factor influencing overall interpersonal trust, next to a person’s trust propensity, situational characteristics (e.g., perceived risk, task complexity, social control mechanisms) and the mood of a person at the time of trust formation (Castelfranchi & Falcone, 1999; Riegelsberger, 2005; Rousseau et al., 1998). The extent to which a person (the trustor) trusts a team member (the trustee) to perform adequately is the trustee’s perceived trustworthiness (Hardin, 2002). In face-to-face settings, people base their first impression of each other’s trustworthiness on different types of signals (perceived features of objects or events which can indicate the presence of non-observable properties) received through different routes (Bacharach & Gambetta, 1997; Donath, 2006, 2007). A person can obtain information that signals such properties via direct encounters with another person as well as via reputational information via a connection (Olson & Olson, 2000; Riegelsberger, 2005). Once these signals are used to reveal a certain perceived property of another, they become cues for that property. In mediated settings signals and routes are not abundantly available, but people nevertheless form a rather persistent impression based on any information they collect (Cooper & Bott, 1999; Hancock & Dunham, 2001; Walther, 1995, 2005; Zolin et al., 2002).

Initial models for impression formation in mediated settings assumed a severely hampered and depersonalized communication process (Short, Williams, & Christy, 1976; Siegel et al., 1986). Subsequent research has shown that only the process of forming an impression is slowed down (Walther, 1993, 1995, 1996). In addition, when information about others is sparse, people tend to over-attribute properties of another, leading to a hyper-personal image, which is more intense on a few properties, but less broadly based on others (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). These results show that the cognitive need to form an impression of others is undiminished in mediated settings. People use any type of information source in any way they can in order to form an initial impression (Lea & Spears, 1995; Liu & Ginther, 2001; Postmes et al., 2005; Walther, 2005); all observations done hereafter are colored by this perception, indeed, people even avoid searching for disconfirming information (Good & Gambetta, 1988; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Robert et al., 2009).

Extensive research has been done on the influence of information modality (e.g., text, video, audio) and richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986) on trust formation (Bos et al., 2002; Olson & Olson, 2000). Nevertheless, it remains unclear what specific categories of information transmitted in these differently encoded messages ‘do the trick’ in professional settings. Several methods are used to support initial impression formation. Most make personal background and social information available, for example through story-telling, role-playing games, team-building exercises, personal profiles and elements in training. Even though they all have been found to support trust formation (Bacharach & Gambetta, 1997; Feng et al., 2004; Hung et al., 2004; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2005; Rusman et al., 2009; Zolin et al., 2003), we do not really know what specific categories of information people are looking for in professional contexts to determine whether someone is able, honest, incorruptible, consistent, responsible and so on, i.e., to make a best guess of someone’s trustworthiness (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001;
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