

Professional, not personal, familiarity works for virtual teams

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Knowing that your colleague on a project once owned a business, earned a specialized degree, or is a technology genius can foster improved working partnerships.

But the fact that she likes chocolate ice cream, fast cars, and the Red Sox is not essential to a productive business collaboration, and can even be detrimental to productivity.

Those are the findings of UConn management professors Lucy Gilson and John Mathieu, and two colleagues, in a recent study titled, "Do I Really Know You—And Does It Matter? Unpacking the Relationship Between Familiarity and Information Elaboration in Global Virtual Teams."

Understanding the dynamics of [virtual teams](#) has been a complicated and vexing problem, write the authors in the paper, which was published online in *Group & Organization Management* and will appear in print in early 2019.

More and more of us are actually working on virtual teams. The researchers consider teams to be "virtual," even if they are in the same building, if most of their communication is done via technology.

"Unfortunately, even when you put the very best people on virtual teams, studies have borne out that they don't perform as well on complex and ambiguous tasks as in-person work groups," says Gilson, head of the UConn management department. "It seems meeting face-to-face, even once, improves the work dynamic."

While previous research tended to lump "[familiarity](#)" into one category, the study authors were able to distinguish between professional and personal knowledge.

They concluded that professional familiarity plays a significant role in shaping subsequent levels of team success, perhaps because when colleagues know something about each other's careers they know when to weigh in and what to expect from the others on the team.

Managers need to make sure virtual teams build strong relationships with one another, specifically knowing the skills, knowledge, and abilities of the team members. When professional familiarity was enhanced, so was the level of work. In contrast, personal familiarity didn't have the same impact.

"For managers, I think the message is that virtual tools give you options, but be careful to pick the right media for your team to get the job done," says Mathieu, a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of Management at UConn and the Friar Chair of Leadership & Teamwork. "It is always best for people to get to know each other before they launch a joint project."

Also, when strangers start working on a task virtually, they tend to "dig in," forgoing exchanges about the challenges and the scope of the work. But in-person conversations that might lead to a new strategy for completing the project—which can be critical for project success—may not be pursued, Gilson says.

To test their theories, the researchers studied employees in an international supply chain company that addressed technology software, hardware, and retail store solutions. Employees worked at 23 locations in 10 countries, including the U.S., China, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, and Taiwan.

The researchers were able to conduct online surveys with 363 people, from 68 teams, and ask them questions about their colleagues' professional achievements, including competencies, reputation, work performance, dependability, and attention to detail. Then they asked questions of a personal nature, about a teammate's values, likes and dislikes, employment history, hobbies, and family status.

In the next phase, team leaders were asked to evaluate their team's

effectiveness and the likelihood that they would work together again. Teams were considered a success if they could deliver their products by the targeted delivery date. In addition, managers' ratings suggested that high-performing teams delivered products of high quality that were valued by internal or external customers.

"Familiarity among teammates doesn't always work the way you'd expect it," Mathieu says. For instance, among surgical teams, familiarity can be helpful unless they become too comfortable and their attentiveness declines. Likewise, student teams in which the teammates are good friends have more personal conflict than teams of strangers, seemingly because politeness and professionalism are expected among strangers.

"We want teams that function well and are efficient," says Mathieu. "We found that those that were professionally familiar did well."

There may be a maximum point of success, however. Higher levels of virtuality appear to dampen the positive relationship between professional familiarity and information elaboration, indicating that if too much of the work is reliant upon technology, the familiarity impact will be diminished.

Bottom line: The type of familiarity is crucial to professional success, say Gilson, Mathieu, and co-authors M. Travis Maynard '07 Ph.D., now a professor at Colorado State University, and Diana R. Sanchez an assistant professor at San Francisco State.

More information: M. Travis Maynard et al, Do I Really Know You and Does It Matter? Unpacking the Relationship Between Familiarity and Information Elaboration in Global Virtual Teams, *Group & Organization Management* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1059601118785842](https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601118785842)

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