Study unveils strategies for global virtual teams to facilitate effective long-distance communication

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Scientists say they have revealed a host of strategies that can facilitate the flow of information among global virtual teams (GVTs) of different

cultural, linguistic, and geographic backgrounds.

In a study published in the *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* the scientists identify three major approaches which they find necessary to ease understanding, overcome failures in communication, and bridge cultural gaps when teams of managers and employers get engaged in e-meetings.

GVTs have gained large popularity, wherein employees work remotely across different countries and time zones, with the virtual space being the common meeting ground. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth of remote working opportunities, prompting scientists to explore how these diverse teams are able to effectively exchange knowledge and insights across their cultural boundaries.

"Living in a multicultural setting necessitates people to adjust their behaviors based on different contexts when communicating with others. For example, it depends on whom they are speaking to, reasons for communicating, and timing needed to exchange and share messages," says Dr. Zakaria, an associate professor at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, and the study's lead author.

The study examines how people adjust cultural and linguistic behaviors when communicating globally. There is a plethora of research on behavior adjustment, but the article stands out in its focus on the phenomenon of cultural code-switching. Studying cultural behaviors took added significance in the pandemic aftermath with "multinational organizations constantly looking for strategies and approaches to manage their global workforces," notes Dr. Zakaria.

She adds, "Current organizational practices and work structures are changing rapidly due to the volatility, unpredictability, and uncertainties of the business environment. Realistically, the COVID-19 pandemic

warrants many businesses, and people to consider the best modus of operandi to stay afloat, resilient, and responsive to cultural nuisances. The post COVID-19 situation has allowed organizations to begin their ventures with a new work model in mind to allow flexibility and survival."

The pandemic has made the concept of work from home (WFH) a global phenomenon which Dr. Zakaria says requires full understanding of the strategies on how "to enable multinational organizations manage people through a novelty work structure called GVTs. Organizations need to recognize the different stages of teamwork and dynamic process of teaming based on the cross-cultural communicative behaviors."

To achieve effective cultural performance, GTVs need to improve their knowledge-sharing activities. The scientists write, "For example, a technical discussion could involve providing back-end support, and the knowledge shared would be programming knowledge to develop accurate technical reports … the technical information provided may aid decision-making, such as preventive action, in the event of a breakdown."

The scientists see the concept of cross-cultural code-switching—the act of changing linguistic and cultural behaviors—to conform to a different linguistic pattern or cultural norm as a component of effective cross-cultural performance. Their paper reads, "Based on our findings, we identified three specific culturally-attuned motivation factors that drive high-context team members to modify their communicative behaviors when working in GVTs."

They mention three major behaviors characterizing cross-cultural code-switching: directness in speech, openness during knowledge sharing, and task-oriented aims. The findings, they maintain, "contribute significantly to the nascent area of GVTs, cultural effects, and switching behaviors in

cross-cultural management."

The study recommends openness when GVTs engage in knowledge sharing. The researchers claim that "foreign team members' openness and friendliness had influenced them [GTVs] to adjust their methods of expression and be more explicit to create a good level of trustworthiness among colleagues."

The respondents in the study "made a point to use an explicit communication style in technical discussions and meetings, as this increased the chances of the discussion being successful and facilitated the decision-making process."

The scientists divide GVTs in terms of communication into two distinct parts: high-context communicative cultures and low-context communicative cultures, with the former centering on underlying context, meaning, and tone in messaging while the latter demonstrates explicit and straightforward verbal communication. They associate low–high-context with GVTs in highly developed Western countries.

"The tendency for foreign GVT members to be straightforward and precise when communicating via email influenced high-context GVT members to adapt their interaction patterns with both foreign and local team members," they say. "Our key finding showed that some high-context GVT members put extra effort into overcoming language barriers using simple English."

The study suggests that while language and culture can obscure effective communication processes, teams can learn to be flexible and achieve effective cross-cultural performance by accommodating different communicative behaviors. Dr. Zakaria thinks that the results of the study could be helpful for global businesses to effectively train their employees and ensure effective communication strategies.

"Our study suggests some practical applications to multinational organizations, global virtual team members, expatriates, and intercultural trainers. Or, more directly, the results of this study could be used for training of cross-cultural team performance in that, along with other dimensions or elements of cross-cultural performance.

"Trainees can be educated about the concept of cultural code-switching and then taught to recognize the cues that might let them know that it is time to code-switch if they want to perform effectively cross-culturally. As for the stakeholders, they could benefit from this study which enhances the significance of different forms of high context and low context communicators."

The pandemic has compelled global businesses to reconsider traditional employment methods, rendering the understanding of organizational behaviors crucial for "multinational organizations to manage people through this new GVT work structure.

"The workplace of tomorrow will be filled with cultural-code switchers—people who continue to work side-by-side with others by accommodating the concepts of diversity, equality, and inclusivity without any fears and worries," Dr. Zakaria says.

Provided by University of Sharjah

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