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Business

## Communicating in the international virtual office

*Lei Meng*

Online communication across continents has helped to change the traditional concept of the office to include coworkers from varied national and cultural backgrounds, thus resulting in the "international virtual office." This environment offers benefits, but presents unique challenges. Problems that can hamper communication – and consequently, productivity – in this setting originate, for the most part, from factors in four primary areas: linguistics, culture, laws and regulations, and technology.

### Linguistic factors

Individuals from different cultures usually speak different languages. This fact presents a basic challenge because information among team members is communicated primarily through the use of spoken and written language. Without a "universal language" that all team members can understand, communication cannot take place. Because it is becoming a global language, English is helping to bridge the communication gap, but linguistic factors will still present unique challenges for team members.

Researcher Kirk St. Amant suggests that for reasons such as "limited access to native English speakers, limited access to good teaching materials and effective and competent instructors, or the nature of a given educational system," English-as-a-second-language (ESL) team members may not understand all of the "nuances and intricate uses of the language." In addition, different dialects of English may cause misunderstanding about the information being conveyed. So, problems caused by linguistic factors still remain, even if all of the team members speak a "universal language" such as English.



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### Cultural factors

Because the practice of information communication varies among cultures, cultural factors will influence the communication process, and the problems that arise from cultural differences can be the most challenging. Different cultures generally hold different values, which affect how individuals shape their own attitudes and which in turn guide their communication behaviors.

Individuals from different cultures often have different rhetorical expectations in communication. Accordingly, a pattern of communication that works best for a particular culture might not be effective for another. For example, individuals may come from a culture that is predominantly low-context or high-context, or direct or indirect.

When coworkers are from both low-context and high-context cultures, team members from low-context cultures may be confused by the implicit way in which the other person is communicating. Such individuals need background information conveyed clearly and explicitly, while their coworkers from high-context cultures tend not to verbalize all of the background information.

For example, suppose some team members are in a country in Asia – where many cultures are considered to be high-context – and some in Western Europe, which are generally understood to be low-context cultures. A Western European coworker may expect considerable detail regarding, for example, the importance of a specific customer to the organization, the exact specifications for the customer's deliverables, and precise timelines. The team member from Asia may communicate from the standpoint that such information is already known or understood or that certain words or phrases he or she has used already provide, through implication, the information the other team member needs. In such cases, it is best for both team members to discuss their expectations for the level of background information that is necessary to complete the project.

Directness and indirectness will also pose problems for the international virtual office. In his presentation "Intercultural conflict patterns and intercultural training implications for Koreans," Professor Yun Hee Choe of the University of Suwon, Korea, illustrates how supervisors might use direct or indirect communication to react to similar situations: "If a North American supervisor is unsatisfied with a subordinate's sales proposal, the response will probably be explicit and direct: 'I can't accept this proposal as submitted, so come up with some better ideas.' A Korean supervisor, in the same situation, might say, 'While I have the highest regard for your abilities, I regret to inform you that I am not completely satisfied with this proposal. I must ask that you reflect further and submit additional ideas on how to develop this sales program.'"

The individual from the indirect culture may feel uncomfortable if the team member from the direct culture uses an imperative and direct tone. And because the team relies on computer-mediated and often asynchronous communication, the problem is exacerbated as the speaker and the receiver of the information will not be in a position to grasp the tone or see the facial expression of the other person.

## Legal factors

Legal issues can also affect the quality of communication. Such issues are typically complex since laws are often promulgated based on cultural values and because few, if any, laws can be applied to every culture. A complicating factor is that since communication in the international virtual office usually occurs electronically, borders become blurred. For this reason, it may be difficult to determine which laws govern employee behavior and communication.

According to St. Amant, this "fuzzy situation" poses specific problems regarding copyrighted material and privacy issues. He indicates, for example, that if one team member originates from a country having a strict copyright law and another member's country of residence has more liberal copyright laws, potential legal problems will arise if the colleague governed by the liberal law uses copyrighted material. Use of such material may be legal in that team member's country but against the law in the colleague's country.

Similarly, since two nations may not share the same laws and ethics on privacy, conflicts and even legal sanctions can

result if one team member exposes the organization by failing to protect information deemed to be private according to the laws of another team member's country.

## Technical factors

Because the international virtual office relies heavily on technology, communication cannot succeed if the technological environment does not support the free and rapid exchange of information. Obsolete technology, in particular, poses significant problems. If an organization's intranet fails for one team member, the exchange of information is delayed, including the transfer of data to other team members for eventual distribution to the customer. In addition, if coworkers do not have sufficient knowledge of how to use e-mail, how to use file transfer programs to upload or download files or how to encrypt important data, communication is hindered or, worse, unsafe.

Network maturity can be of particular concern for team members in nations that are in the process of upgrading their telecommunications infrastructures. Some Eastern European nations that have recently joined the European Union, for example, are in the process of enhancing and expanding broadband access to workers and private citizens in those countries. While these nations are striving for parity of network availability and speed with their Western European counterparts, some communication delays and differences in processing time may still occur.

As an example, suppose that a team member (Bob), who works in a large North American branch of a global firm, is collaborating on a multimedia presentation with another team member (Mary), who is at the firm's branch office in Warsaw. Network outages can and certainly do occur in any geographic location at any time. Bob is also aware that in Mary's location, the telecommunications infrastructure is being overhauled and that she may not be able to receive and send the large files that they need to exchange for their project. So, Mary and Bob distribute the work in such a way that they can limit the size of any files that Mary will need to review. She will work on the text portions of the presentation, and Bob will convert his large multimedia and graphics files to PDF format and compress the files before sending them to her for final review. Bob will then assemble the files and take responsibility

for delivering the final product. As Mary's network capabilities improve, she will keep Bob informed so that they can continually reassess their capabilities and optimize their project plan.

Team members should be aware of such differences in the technology available to their colleagues, and companies should work toward investing in the infrastructure to facilitate communication among coworkers.

## Proposed practices

Some basic policies can help organizations to address these issues, can increase productivity, can improve the flow of information among team members and can help avoid personal conflicts and legal liability.

Practice for linguistic aspects. Organizations can require team members to convert culturally specific wording into more general wording and to use a standard vocabulary so that the international audience can easily understand the information. Specific practices that can be put into place include:

- Avoid culturally specific wording such as idiomatic expressions and metaphoric expressions that are, in St. Amant's phrase, "linked to a particular cultural pattern of use." Regardless of how fluently an international coworker speaks English, it is unrealistic for that individual to know and stay current on all of the idiomatic or metaphoric expressions in the English language. Such expressions are largely culturally dependent, and understanding them requires that the individual have regular contact with the culture. Avoiding idiomatic and metaphoric expressions helps to preclude the possibility that the receiver of the information will skew the speaker's intended meaning.

- Use standard, simple English in communication. Since many coworkers in the international virtual office are ESL speakers who have been taught standard English grammar and usage, those team members may not know the nuances of the language. To help ensure that ESL speakers will not be confused by a particular expression, using simple words and standard sentence structure is recommended. For example, avoid using demonstrative pronouns such as *this* or *that*; use parallel structure when listing individual items; and avoid long or overly complex sentences.

■ Attach glossaries to written materials when both the sender and receiver of the information are using written communication. An organization may also take the additional step of building a standard glossary for use by the team to explain terms, abbreviations and uncommon words so that the information can be communicated correctly.

Practice for cultural aspects. Organizations should consider implementing policies such as these for team members:

■ Show respect for and appreciation of other cultures. St. Amant suggests in "Success in the International Virtual Office" that this practice is essential not only in creating a positive first impression but also in demonstrating commitment to the overall relationship. Team members will see that their colleagues value their contributions. Practicing tolerance – even if one team member may not behave in a manner that is considered appropriate in the culture of another – can help to avoid compromising the business relationship.

■ Workers should acquire basic knowledge about intercultural communication and their colleagues' cultural backgrounds. By knowing more about other cultures, team members can adjust their behavior to adapt and respond appropriately to the behaviors of their coworkers. Employers can also offer to their employees training in the basic concepts of directness and indirectness as well as low-context and high-context cultures, especially if those employees will work in an international virtual team. Whenever possible, organizations should make available an expert on intercultural communication who can help workers resolve problems that may arise based on cultural differences.

Practice for legal aspects. Legal factors in international virtual offices are

complex but can be more easily resolved if the organization adopts a "strictest law" policy. This means that the company will first evaluate the national laws that govern behavior and communication of all team members. The company will then develop an internal policy that ensures that the strictest laws among those examined govern the behavior of all team members – regardless of the country in which the employee works.

For example, the nation in which one team member works may have a liberal copyright law, while strict copyright laws are in force in the country in which another team member works. In this case, the company's internal policy should meet the expectations of the nation with the strictest copyright law.

Practice for technical aspects. Obsolete technologies also pose problems for the international virtual office. For this reason, companies should pay close attention to the technical factors that can impede communication among team members and be prepared to invest in the infrastructure that will foster collaboration and productivity of team members.

As Jim Suchan and Greg Hayzak suggested in a 2001 article in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, "The Communication Characteristics of Virtual Teams: A Case Study," companies need to invest in technologies and networks and recruit talented technical support staff so that the technologies are maintained at a level sufficient to meet the work requirements for all team members. In addition, technical problems should be resolved quickly and efficiently by the technical support staff so that the communication among team members is not delayed.

If companies provide appropriate training to their employees, including individual training, then team members can make full use of the technologies that work best in the online environment while saving technical support staff time in resolving the issues.

### Conclusion

The success of communication in the international virtual office is closely related to linguistic, cultural, legal and technical factors. By being aware of these factors and proactively putting policies in place to address them, companies can help increase their productivity and avoid communication problems, personnel conflicts and legal liability. Awareness of cultural differences and the willingness on the part of both the organization and its employees to adapt are keys to success. **M**

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