

The Communication Process in Virtual Teams

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The purpose of this paper is to present the paradigms of virtual teams in the communication process in the context of the existing literature in this field. We argue the above issues and we explore the communication process within virtual teams like an interactive, complex and limiting process in connexion with the advantages and disadvantages offered by information technology.

Key words: *Virtual team, communication, competence, cultural diversity, information technology (IT).*

Introduction

The development of the informational technology, globalisation, the constraints imposed by the international business environment, are phenomena that leave their mark on the management of the organisations.

Nowadays, managers are constrained to take a series of decisions, both under the pressure of time and the pressure generated by the lack or shortage of financial human resources. The phrase – man is the most important resource of an organisation – led to the transformation of the sustainable competitive advantage into a real riding hag for the managers that give the company outstanding performance over a period of time.

Specialists come to the managers assistance suggesting that the virtual teams represent one of the solutions meant to lead to obtaining a long-run sustainable competitive advantage into organisations (Handy, 1995; Lipnack and Stamps, 2000; Skyrme, 2003).

The enthusiasm of the virtual team partisans is motivated by the fact that:

- the philosophy and the culture of the organisation are highly valorised by this type of teams,
- some barriers like the ones related to time, space and structure are easier to be removed (Skyrme, 2003).

In the era of technology, the virtual teams become more and more popular, and their limits, especially those related to the formal and informal communication, the acceptance of the organisational change, leadership, are considered to be insignificant barriers, easy to be removed.

Even though the traditional teams are losing more and more ground to the virtual teams, one can not affirm that their existence is in danger. The fact of combining and modelling the advantages of the two types of teams – virtual and classic/traditional – leads to an efficient utilisation of the human resources of an organisation.

The definition of virtual teams

The definition of the virtual teams has not aroused violent controversies and disputes, and the establishment of a certain minimal agreement around the core term “technology” was succeeded (Duarte and Tennant Snyder, 2001, Lloyg and Junemann, 2003).

Lipnack and Stamps (2000, p. 18) define a virtual team as: A group of people who work interdependently with a shared purpose across space, time, and organisation boundaries using technology.

The limits of this definition consist of the fact that it does not emphasise the complex and complementary competences of the virtual team. It is not only the technology that marks the difference between a virtual and a traditional team, but also the ensemble of the complex and complementary that can be reunited at one time, in order to realise a complex activity irrespective of space and time.

Skyrme (2003, p. 148), considers that a group is not a team, but members of different groups can work together as a team. Team is an entity with certain cohesion whose members have the same objective and everyone heads for success.

In conclusion, the virtual team’s flexibility depends on the way of purchasing and redis-

tributing different types of competences, according to the complexity of the activity that is to be carried out at one time. This makes the virtual team to be considered the micro cosmos of the virtual organisations.

In this context the virtual reality is three-dimensional in time, space and according to the ensemble of competences that the virtual team can reunite at a given time.

Our concept about virtual teams

The virtual team is a team with a well-defined purpose which consists of realising a common object, whose members are in different work places (inside or outside the organisation, inside or outside the borders of a country); it uses the informational technology and it is continuously reconfigured, according to the necessary complex competences at

a given time, in order to achieve the pursued object. The virtual team represents an advanced version of a traditional team with a high level of cohesion.

The core of the virtual team is human capital by his competences, as well as the technology by communication and treatment of information facilities that offers it.

Communication within virtual teams

Having as a basis the classic model of communication by Shanon (1948) and taking into consideration the particularities of communication within virtual team (Duarte and Tennant Snyder (2001) and Wickham (1999)) we have made the scheme of a communication system within virtual teams (figure 1).

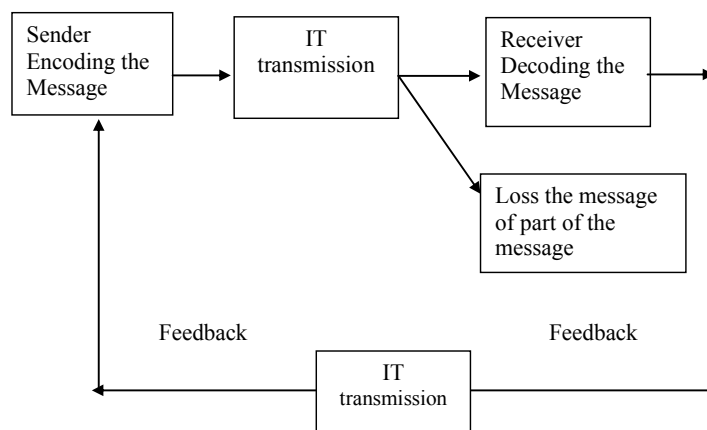


Figure no 1. The communication system of the virtual team (VT)

We have characterised the communication within virtual teams like an *interactive, complex and limiting process*.

Communication interaction is due to the facilities given by information technology. Sending the message by means of Internet technology makes the relation between sender and receiver to be established in a very short time even if the messages are not directly sent to the receiver.

The advantage of virtual communication, as an interactive process, consists of the fact that it is realised on different relations:

1. one sender – more senders,
2. one sender – more receivers,
3. more senders – more senders,
4. more senders – more receivers.

Due to the use of information technology,

coding and decoding the messages are made automatically without important modifications of the message.

But there is the *disadvantage* given by the possibility that in the IT field, the message to be totally or partially lost. This will lead to delays in the communication process and to a certain mood of uncertainty between the members of the virtual team.

Delays in receiving the message lead to the appearance of some time to think in supplying with the answer, which diminishes the spontaneity and the creativity of the receiver. The consequences of losing totally or partially the message are all the more serious as the communication is realised between more senders because, at one time, it will be difficult to identify the ‘missing link’ among the

series of messages between the members of the team, and thus, the team will not be able to realise, in time, its objective.

Thus the communication becomes inefficient the members of the virtual team have no longer a clear perception and an overview of the existent situation.

Another *disadvantage* of the interactive communication is that the employee feels isolated in front of the computer and has no longer the protection of the other members of the team.

The feeling of isolation, correlated with the lack of overview of the objectives of the team lead to disappointment and the appearance of relation conflicts within the team.

The conflict of relations is based on disagreement created between two or more members of the virtual team.

The source of the conflict of relations is the misunderstandings that occur at one time in the process of communication and in the way of thinking of the team members.

Communication complexity is the result of diverse competences of the virtual team members (Rich, 1997), instability and weak demarcation of the roles within the virtual team.

The members of a team with diverse competences gather much more abilities, skills, knowledge (Burlea Şchiopoiu, 2003) that can contribute on one hand to improving the performance (Milliken and Martins, 1996; Keller 2001), and on the other hand it can affect negatively the cohesion of the group because of some lacks in the communication process.

Cultural diversity within virtual teams can lead to an inexact understanding of the message, especially if we take into consideration the lack of body language that, in some cases, has the role to emphasise or to complete certain essences of the message.

The members of the virtual team have a flexible culture that they adapt permanently to organisational culture according to the empowerment level that they have and the role that they accomplish at one time within the team.

Belbin considers that the role of the team represents (Belbin, 2000, p. 25) ‘. . . useful

behaviours which make an effective contribution to team performance...’. Thus, there is a strong connection between the establishment of the roles and the performance of the team even if the roles change during the process of realisation of the team’s objective (Carnal, 1999; Heckhusen, 1989).

Because virtual teams are heterogeneous teams, the establishment of the roles is a very difficult process that leads to creating some barriers in the co-ordination process of the team members.

The importance of the responsibility establishment of the team members is analysed by some authors (Broom and Kever, 1989; McFadzean, 1998, Burlea Şchiopoiu and Barbacioru 2005) according to the efficiency of the final results of the team, not taking into account the relation between responsibilities, communication, collaboration and efficiency.

Other authors (Belbin 2000, Davidson – 1994) consider that the establishment and the diversity of roles within a team have a great impact on the performance and the sharing of knowledge as well as on collaboration between the members of the group.

The one-dimensional analysis of different variables that influence work team, either it refers to a traditional team or a virtual one, is a weakness of the literature review. This leads to minimising the communication importance in realising a definite profit and emphasises the feeling of uncertainty, reducing the stability and the commitment of the members of the virtual team.

The on-line co-operation and co-ordination between team members become inertial being characterised by a certain level of constraint.

The lack of social integration between the members of the virtual team reduces the satisfaction level (O’Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett, 1989).

Within virtual teams, the cognitive conflicts that influence directly the team’s performance have a probability of appearance, bigger than the affective conflicts (Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Thus, the communication process becomes

rigid, emphasising the egocentric part of the members of the virtual team and diminishing the feeling of reciprocal trust.

Communication limitation represents a paradox and it is due to the lack of expressivity of the message that has been sent, even though apparently there is a bigger control over the dysfunctions that take place while sending the message, and still the exchange of some informal information is practically limited both in time and in space due to the lack of face - to - face communication.

The messages that have been sent by a traditional team include a series of formal and informal information that gives the recipient more clues about the way he or she has to interpret the message.

Besides, the message coding, decoding and feed-back take place suddenly and lead to more control on disruptions during the transmission process and to a better monitoring of the impact of the message over the receiver, and thus the possibility of an immediate correction of the message.

Conclusions

Communication within virtual team is a complex and fundamental process that implies a detailed analysis of the human and organisational aspects according to the technology that is being used.

The work in the virtual team has some advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages consist of the use of IT that offers multiple possibilities in order to have an efficient co-operation within virtual team and eliminates the cultural and geographical barriers.

The disadvantages are due to the lack of synchronisation during the communication process and may produce conflicts among the members as well as among the virtual team.

Finally, a virtual team can be a cohesive and interdisciplinary team that clearly understands the mission of organisation in relationship with the communication process.

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