



## “Who's Going to Share my Birthday Cake?” & Other Intercultural Challenges of Virtual Teamwork

*by Dr. George F. Simons*

Last month I spent most of my time working with a client exploring the formation of virtual global teams. VGT's offer the opportunity for managers and specialists to accelerate projects and achieve cost savings by bringing many forms of expertise from around the world to bear on a project. Such teams are able to share information and operate on a 24-hour clock in order to coordinate their efforts and simultaneously engineer results.

Being in Holland since late summer, I was experiencing the same results on a much smaller scale, working with my fellow GSI professionals in the USA. Actually they might describe it more as my dumping work on them overnight and going to bed with a peaceful conscience! Kidding aside, short of our need to perfect information retrieval systems, we came a long step toward our ideal of being able to serve clients worldwide from any place in the world as well as, or even *better* than we do from home base. Furthermore, I was able to tap into my large online network of fellow interculturalists and other professionals to explore what was already known about VGTeamwork. VTeams are about the future of work.

My client wisely realized that the greatest challenges to forming effective VGTs were not technological. Certainly there was the cost and difficulty of securing adequate bandwidth to support the technology in many parts of the world. There is the ongoing propensity of complex systems to crash more often than we would like. Still, most of what is needed from a technological standpoint is available today or soon will be.

The primary challenges of VG Teamwork, however, come from the so-called "soft side" from cultural and intercultural issues:

- *What kind of organizational culture is needed to support this way of working in the organization that undertakes it?*
- *What intercultural dilemmas does new technology and its uses pose as people from different disciplines, organizations, countries, regions and ethnicities start to cooperate?*

Here are some challenges that are being addressed, or can be, through cultural research, organizational culture change, training, and active learning projects in a global, multi-cultural environment:

- If the organization's culture is strongly hierarchical and competitive. Information is guarded and used as a currency for political clout and promotion, how will VGTs requiring more open exchange of data operate in a climate of tight-fisted suspicion?
- If the organization rewards "Indiana Jones" type expatriates, those who set out for the wilds, machete in hand and carve out new businesses for the enterprise, how will it reward those (perhaps now seen as necessary "nerds") who stay at home and get much more done from a keyboard? Or, should we stop thinking of them as stay-at-homes, since they go to the farthest corners of the world and back again in a matter of seconds?

- How do you create and maintain a team when thousands of miles of land, sea and culture separate its members? "Who's going to share my birthday cake," the title of this article, was the poignant question raised by a member of an engineering team who had been working virtually for only a few months. Separated from his colleagues, largely people of similar cultural background, by at most a couple hours drive, his forthcoming birthday only underlined the experience he was having. He was already hurt by separation and loneliness, for many of us the "terminal illness" of the electronic age. How shall we use this technology to connect human beings to each other at the same time that it separates them?
- Whose etiquette and whose protocol and whose language will determine the spirit and context of how people work together? How do you, for example, keep an English-speaking minority from dominating a team when the "*lingua franca*" of the group is English? How do you say hello and schmooze with your virtual colleagues when you can't gather by the water cooler or in the company canteen.
- How shall we deal with colleagues, contractors, customers, governments, and other stakeholders online whose values about how information and intellectual property are quite different from our own? They may be guarded and not share essential data, or may use what they get from others for different purposes or distribute it to others unforeseen by the senders. Java technology may extend security to the object level in an e-mail attachment, but how do you decide who gets access to the object?



VGTeamwork offers culturally significant advantages as well:

- E-mail that allows people the opportunity to begin relationships sight unseen, can keep racial and ethnic biases out of play.

- Electronic meeting tools like Global Vision software allow people whose culture is adverse to open brainstorming to become vibrant participants in the process.
- Since fewer real expatriates will be needed, more local professionals can enter the virtual community. Corporate installations, if done in culturally sensitive ways, can empower rather than colonize host environments.
- Since technical work "the hard side" is done online, actual person-to-person gatherings, when they occur can be used to develop the team, explore cultural issues, address critical "soft-side" issues and humanize what are now often overly busy work sessions.

Soon I will have another birthday. I look forward to another year in which to address these issues with clients and colleagues. Last year the invitations to my birthday party were sent as usual. I still knew who was going to share my birthday cake and the slices were generous and the chocolate icing real, not virtual. I don't know where or how next year's celebration will take place but I intend to make it cyberdelightful as well.

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