



Meeting the Intercultural Challenges of Virtual Work

by Dr. George F. Simons



Virtual working involves individuals and teams who communicate and collaborate largely via technology rather than face to face. It involves:

1. **technology that is relatively common everywhere** such as the phone, fax and e-mail
2. **technology that is becoming common**, like GSM, videoconferencing, shared applications and other forms of GroupWare, internet and intranet connections, knowledge management systems and smart machines.
3. **leading edge technology** that either belongs to a specific industry or is under development and, generally speaking, does not yet arrive “off the shelf.” Examples of this are virtual environments or “caves” for communication and product design.

Who is the virtual worker?

Many people are already virtual workers to some degree, whether they know it or not. They communicate virtually on an everyday basis with people who are even within shouting range via technology rather than walking over to them and holding a conversation. Some work regularly with others whom they do not see because they are on different shifts. Others are telecommuters, full time or for part of the week or for parts of their job. When jobs are done by a number of people in different places or at different times, we speak of “distributed working,” or of a “distributed workplace.”

Virtual working takes on an extra meaning, however, when entire business processes are virtualized. In other words, new technology is no longer just provides better or faster tools to help us do what we have already been doing, but a fresh way to manage, collaborate on or even transform a process and realize added benefits. Often this involves other stakeholders who bring extra diversity to the scene. In a complex virtual project, besides professionals and workers from various parts of the organization, there may also be full or part time consultants, vendors and service suppliers, government agents, and representatives of community groups.

Diversity challenges in virtual environments

In all cases of virtual working, the diversity and intercultural issues already resident in the situation assume new virtual dimensions as well, with added consequences for how people behave toward each other via technology. An Arab proverb says, “We don't know who discovered water, but we are sure that it wasn't a fish.” Culture is pervasive and even more transparent in virtual working than in face-to-face collaboration.

In cyberspace, we know even less about what we don't know and how it may show up. While reactive diversity management of virtual work (watchdogging e-mail harassment, online humor, etc.) may have already surfaced as a part of a traditional diversity initiative, managing the diversity of distributed workers and workplaces has only begun. Some initial steps might include:

- Addressing cultural issues and learning how to learn about culture as part of the training and teambuilding for virtual working.
- Looking for cultural factors in unexpected responses, reactions, delays and disconnects while working virtually.

- Finding cultural informants and information from the cultures involved, e.g., sustaining a newsgroup or forum on this topic as a regular part of the virtual team's communication strategy.

When the virtual workers or teams are on different continents, in other countries, and separated by time zones, the challenge grows. In such cases,

1. There are new intercultural dimensions to the activities involved in the virtual work processes themselves. Virtual working creates its own culture as well as borrowing from as well as confronting the cultures of its users and their organizations or parts.
2. Specific cultural challenges arise to the creation, formation and maintenance of relationships of individual workers and teams that will take place largely at a distance.

Let's look at this in greater detail.

Virtual culture

Introducing virtual technology to manage business processes creates a culture of its own among those who use it. This culture is often described as "new ways of working." Marshall McLuhan's dictum surfaces again, "The medium is the message." Virtual media send an unseen cultural message. Individuals and teams are constrained to create or modify values and beliefs as well as relationships and behaviors in order to survive and succeed in their new electronic working environment.

The structure of a virtual culture inevitably bears the cultural values and priorities of its creators and therefore may seem like cultural interference or domination when transported abroad. Therefore it is important to:

- Provide a culturally sensitive introduction of new ways of working. Discuss the new tools with the new users and those who manage them. Ask what implications exist for them that may be important and different. Listen carefully to their reactions and pay special attention to their hesitancy.
- Carefully craft a business case with full participation of all parties involved so that the benefits become tangible and everyone is an owner.
- Not assume that there must be only one culture of virtual working. Many aspects of virtual working developed in high tech/low context environments can benefit from diverse cultural ideas and habits in the transfer of technology to higher contexts.

Among the generally ascribed cultural values of virtual teamwork are strong vision, high trust and open communication. Some of the behaviors associated with this culture are highly independent yet interdependent planning and decision-making, working in short bursts rather than sustained orchestration.

Assumptions about where and how work is done change. A recent telecom ad in the newspaper said, "You don't have to leave home for a top-level meeting."

How do you supervise workers you don't see? Results, rather than time and effort are what you do see. Therefore, outputs become primary. In many cases virtual teamwork creates a 24-hour workday. It becomes critical to:

- Discuss work and time management styles that differ culturally and personally, and work on building trust around the difference.
- Examine health and safety implications of virtual work, not just use of technology, but its psychology, the stresses it creates and its impact on the lifestyle of the workers.

Virtual culture clashes with organizational culture

Remember, that organizational culture is, most of the time, a particular expression of regional and ethnic culture. The values and behaviors of virtual working can seem threatening if they are not already a part of the culture of the larger organization. They need to be fully communicated, understood wrestled with and accepted if the organization is to support the implementation of virtual working and realize the benefits that it offers. Hard feelings may arise, for example, if the virtual team operates with "flat" values in an hierarchical organization. Suspicion and resentment may surface if "work" is defined in terms of hours spent in an office and virtual workers may not be found there on the normal schedule.

In cultures where information is highly guarded, used as power or traded as currency, virtual teamwork and the corporate intelligence it creates will be affected. Expectations may be frustrated and little value added may result from virtualizing business operations in such environments. Therefore successful implementation of virtual working may require that we:

- Work out agreements about sharing people's time information in ways that fit, as well as challenge the existing culture.
- Reward sharing psychologically and reinforce it by the compensation system. People should start to think automatically, "You are not a real professional unless you share."
- At the same time, take security concerns most seriously and work out the needed protocols and commitments to prevent leaks and invasions.

Relationships of individuals and teams working virtually

The members of the virtual teams will need to become culturally competent, at least in respect to their own members, if they are to manage diversity issues. The sense of being part of a team can be difficult to create under such circumstances. Regional, ethnic and other forms of diversity may already dictate what a "team" is, how work is parceled out, how authority and responsibility are exercised and how rewards are distributed. Virtual workers and teams, as well as their leaders and coaches, need imagination to employ the very technology that separates them to connect to and learn about each other and to resolve these functional cultural challenges.

There are some diversity advantages to virtual working, however. Skin color and other biases based on visual factors will be minimized when the group works in technology that is limited to audio and written transmission. Individuals who by ethnicity or personality are less outspoken in face-to-face situations may contribute more abundantly to newgroups and forums or in some forms of GroupWare that provide more offline time to prepare a response, or where they enjoy anonymity or less exposure.

Finally, face-to-face interactions, when they do happen, can be made to be of a higher quality. They can be used focus mainly on the important issues of vision, planning and above all, motivation and teambuilding rather than lower level data sharing and technical discussion that can be done by virtual means prior to and as a follow-up to the face-to-face sessions.

Strategies for virtual teamwork across contexts include:

- a. Pay careful attention to disjointed working processes, misunderstandings that surface, failed expectations and above all, loss of trust.
- b. Address upfront differences in the understanding of what is a team, who belongs to it and how it functions.
- c. Get a functional understanding about how teams may differ and can disrupt cooperation. Here are some examples:

In more collective cultures:

- Teams are deceptively easy to form among like nationals but outsiders may remain outside.
- Individuals assigned a task may instinctively form a team to do it when others might expect individuals to take responsibility.
- The team may be more extensive in its membership and information sharing than you expect.
- Decisions are collaborative and the spokesperson can't privately modify them. Don't put them on the spot.
- New information and changes late in the team's process on a project stalls the mechanism.

In more individualistic cultures:

- Teams allow individuals to "star" in ways that may annoy collective-oriented members.
- Individuals are more prone to take decisions on their own and (may) inform others only on a need-to-know basis.
- The best teams are rarely larger than 6 or 8 people
- Individuals are expected to take charge, often resent micromanaging or being micromanaged by others
- Disconcerting, last-minute changes in direction may occur if seen as strategic.

Here are a half a dozen more specific cultural arenas in virtual working that will require careful management, along with some tips for how to address them.

1. Mismatch of cultural context in virtual communication

In individualistic cultures (Northern Europe, North America) commonly the MESSAGE is all that is needed for the recipient to respond or take action. A person from such an individualistic culture may send a one-line e-mail request, but to act or respond, a person from a more collective culture (in varying degrees - Southern US, Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America) may need to know:

- *Who (status, role) is the sender?*
- *Why was this message written?*
- *Who else in my organization knows about this or needs to know about it?*
- *What information, consensus or permission do I need from others in order to respond?*

How can this be addressed?

- a. Training can underscore the importance and nature of differing contexts on both sides. Use face-to-face time to get teams started in this direction and to maintain them.
- b. Encourage virtual workers and teams to build common context for teamwork by providing personal information, pictures, accomplishments, titles, roles in the system, etc.
- c. Allow for online time for introductions, warm-ups, and chitchat about things especially people you have in common. Remember that people need more of this online than they do in face-to-face working environments. Encourage social events and personal forums online. Remember, the idea here is to provide enough information and contact to help the your distant partner(s) to understand your context and become comfortable with it.

2. Difference in action orientation affecting communication styles

Individualistic cultures stress what you can do and what you know. Despite similar technical capabilities, more collective cultures often stress who you are and whom you know. In one case, facts, data, and deadlines get things done; in the other, relationships, contacts, and roles get things done.

Inappropriate, unprepared, incorrect, or blunt responses from the “what” cultures cause loss of face in the “who” cultures for: the sender, the sender’s superior and subordinates as well as for the recipient and his or her network.

A few tips:

- Corporate resources on intercultural communication may already exist in diversity training and pre-departure training for expatriates. Adapt and extend to those who are virtual expatriates and electronic immigrants.
- Make it your day-to-day strategy to learn from each other to get value-added from all cultural approaches.
- Take facilitation time for cultural process just as you often take time to examine the process of a meeting.

3. Time in cyberwork

In individualistic cultures, time is money. In collective person oriented cultures, relationship is money (and much more). This often results in mismatch of expectations around use of time, response time, meeting deadlines that may not be sorted out as easily in virtual environments as they are face to face.

When polychronic (human multitasking) cultures face monochronic (one-thing-at-a-time) cultures meet, each sees the other as respectively narrow-minded or distracted. Polychronic individuals to teamwork may seem less committed to the team or differ in how they arrange work because they have multiple responsibilities. Different uses of time may not be immediately apparent in virtual working because they are less visible and often masked by time-zone differences.

To get value-added from both polychronic and monochronic approaches, team members should be encouraged to:

- a. Identify the term perspective of your partners, are they long, medium, short-term thinkers and planners?
- b. Get the full picture of how the other culture works. Negotiate within the realm of the possible. Plan in lead-time where necessary.

4. Cultural preferences for certain technologies

Cultures may prefer or resist the use of certain media or technologies at different times and in different contexts. For example, where saving face is important, there may be embarrassment about such simple things as one’s spelling skills when contributing to forums or e-mail, and concern about giving unprepared, quick, imperfect answers in real time connections.

Taking advantage of the technology can help somewhat.

- Acquire and encourage use of spelling and grammar checkers, dictionaries, thesaurus, templates, wizards and autosummary (review before sending) software features.
- Use all the media that are available to you. Attach contextual documents, graphics, video clips, - whatever your counterparts need to be comfortable.

An editor can also be assigned to assist ESL speakers in publication of contributions to forums, websites, etc. ESL contributors submit through the editor rather than directly.

Some individuals and groups may resist certain technologies because they reinforce a *power imbalance* between first and second language speakers or writers, viz., native English speakers and ESL speakers. Second language speakers become an out-group.

Some strategies that have worked here include teaching native speakers and writers how to speak their mother tongue as a second language. This doesn’t mean “dumbing down” how one speaks or writes. Even less is it an attempt to be patronizing. Rather, it is acquiring the set of skills needed to:

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- Express yourself adequately while avoiding slang, jargon, and unfamiliar acronyms.
 - Write simply, using limited ESL vocabulary and short sentences.
 - Select appropriate forms of address and levels of directness.

5. Conflict management

In some cultures surfacing conflict publicly is deemed immature while others see a good argument as bringing the best out of people. Where there is a mismatch:

- Prefer asynchronous, (conferencing, e-mail) over real-time connections (online communication, chat rooms) for working out the positions and details - these technologies give the parties time to think and confer before responding.
- Use teleconferencing to affirm the relationship and private phone calls for off-line resolution of touchy items where necessary. Higher context cultures have a preference for media like these, which provide more context than electronic messaging.
- Discuss and negotiate for the media you prefer to use for resolving conflict and creating agreements, as well as for other tasks.
- Accommodate your partners and reduce potential conflict by using multiple channels of communication as a matter of course.

6. Differing understandings of authority and who's in charge

Clashes can occur in virtual working because cultures differ in how they derive, value and use authority. Authority can result from, variously:

- Role, status, position in the hierarchy
- Control of critical resources and contacts
- Knowledge and competence
- Initiative taking and group acknowledgement
- Consensus

In some cultures, the person responsible for a virtual operation may not be the person with the technical know-how. You might expect such a person to be naturally reluctant to discuss certain levels of detail beyond his or her competence, and yet this person's support may be required for decisions to be made and to authorize next steps. If you are dealing with such a person, or suspect you are:

- Maintain proper forms of address and observe protocol. In virtual environments the status the person you are dealing with may not be apparent, but may be important.
- Be sensitive to reluctance on the other person's part to take part in peer-to-peer discussions. If you sense that the person in charge does not have the professional depth or hands on experience to respond, encourage them to bring a professional subordinate into the conversation either directly or indirectly. Regularly acknowledge both the superior and subordinate for value each adds.
- Keep the person in authority very well informed about your conversations with the subordinate if they occur directly.

Virtual working is in its infancy, despite its widespread growth. Managing differences in this context is complicated by the fact that new developments in technology can quickly add new stresses as well as alleviate old ones in distributed workplaces. This is an exciting challenge for diversity professionals and interculturalists alike.

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