An Observation of Cultural Diversity and Information & Communication Impacts on Global Virtual Teams: An Exploratory Study by Pnina Shachaf

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**Article Summary**

In the last thirty years, digital technologies have made their way into nearly every corner of the modern organization. Competition is at an all-time high, and there are numerous changes that are occurring in the professional sector that, if not addressed, could create challenges. Along with the backseat that face-to-face communication has taken to technological advancements, cultural barriers are becoming more frequent as these new technologies come in contact with an ever-more cultured labor force. So, how do new information and communication technologies interact and influence the global workforce? How are technologies shaping organizational structure? Are there some technologies that better advance intercultural communication more than others?

*Cultural Diversity and Information and Communication Technology Impacts on Global Virtual Teams: An Exploratory Study* is an academic journal article by Pnina Shachaf that works to answer questions like these. This study takes an interpretive approach to better understanding the relationship between information and communication technology (ICT), cultural diversity, and global virtual teams (GVTs) within the field of intercultural communication. Shachaf’s article outlines a study that was done to determine if cultural diversity (which is more apparent in today’s workforce) existent in GVTs has an influence on the team’s effectiveness, and, if new communicative technologies help to reduce any intercultural barriers that may exist in these GVTs.

The study conducted in Shachaf’s article interviewed 41 individuals representing nine different countries (France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States). All 41 individuals interviewed worked for the same Fortune 500 technological firm, which had locations all over the world. Each individual was asked a series of open-ended questions that pertained to digital technologies and the growing
presence of a more cultured workforce, either via face-to-face or over the phone. The answers from the questions were then transcribed and interpreted through the use of an inductive interpretation method, which categorized the data by communicative style (i.e., intercultural, informal, verbal, nonverbal). Keywords in the participants’ responses were tracked and then analyzed in order to identify any communicative patterns that may exist from one participant to another. Finally, a data matrix (“analysis system”) was used in order to provide numerical insights behind the keywords, giving the patterns in communication a substantial relationship to the types of digital technologies that a participant might prefer using in a GVT.

The results of the study were incredibly interesting. Shachaf’s study found that “cultural diversity has both positive and negative effects on GVT effectiveness. Participants stated that the negative effects of heterogeneity were due to challenges associated with intercultural communication, and that the positive effects were due to a potential for better decision making” (Shachaf, 2008, p. 6). Of course, the “language barrier” is always an obstacle that can be difficult to steer around in an intercultural context, but it was interesting to discover which types of ICTs were used by GVTs in order to alleviate these communicative issues. GVTs able to remedy these concerns were considered the most effective in professional environments where creativity and meeting deadlines were important factors. The data compiled showed that between e-mail, chat, e-meetings, teleconferencing, team room activities, and face-to-face meetings, GVTs had the most success utilizing e-mail and team rooms (an electronic shared group workspace). E-mail was popular among GVT group members mainly because of its ease of use, its commonality as an ICT, and users having the ability to decipher and look up any unknown language. Team rooms were a favorite among GVT members because the technology exhibited a clear
communication pattern, it could be used remotely, and users felt a sense of individual purpose with the GVT by engaging with the software.

**Relationship to Course**

It is without any doubt that the Shachaf article is directly connected to the Technological Imperative of intercultural communication that is highlighted in chapter one of Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama’s text, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* (2013). Martin and Nakayama’s text explains how technology and human communication, especially at the intercultural level, impact each other greatly. The text explains that, because of technology, there is an increase in the amount of information that is being produced, sent, received, and analyzed. Additionally, it states that ICT greatly affects who we are able to communicate with, how we communicate with them, as well as when the communication takes place.

It is evident (as explained in the Martin & Nakayama text and proven in the Shachaf study) that people from both similar and different cultural backgrounds utilize ICTs, but in different ways. For example, people from different cultures may use e-mail as a way to communicate at work, and that specific type of ICT may prove beneficial in mitigating any cultural boundaries due to online resources like spell check, built in synonym generators, online thesaurus’, etc. Conversely, people who share cultural similarities (homogeneous in nature) may use ICTs such as team rooms (SharePoint, Google Docs, etc.) to further strengthen their cultural identities, share ideas and opinions with people who have similar interests, or reach out to people who may be part of their cultural community.

It could be deemed accurate to say that there is a direct link between the study conducted in the Shachaf article to three of the “five aspects of culture and technology” mentioned on page 23 of *Intercultural Communication in Contexts* by Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama
increased contact with people who are different from us, increased contact with people who are similar to us who can provide communities of support, and, identity, culture, and technology). What is most interesting about the Shachaf article is that it deliberately looks at specific types of ICTs and then determines how these ICTs effect virtually-engaged heterogeneous work teams. Where the Martin & Nakayama text vaguely glosses over technology and its impact on intercultural communication, Shachaf dives right into the midst of the topic and tests not only the effectiveness of these teams depending on the extent of their heterogeneous makeup, but also determines which types of information and communication technology mitigate or enhance the teams’ verbal and nonverbal communication barriers. Due to the extent the study, the topic of human identity within subcultures comes to the surface as an unexpected finding. This finding directly correlates to the identity, culture, and technology aspect of culture and technology highlighted in the Martin & Nakayama text.

Response

After reading through the Shachaf article, I was impressed with the depth of the study and how far Shachaf went in order to uncover communication patterns. The testing process section of the article was very dense, and I found it incredible how many different technologies and testing methods were used in order to track keywords and analyze numerical data behind what the text represented. The results, with as far as the study went in order to achieve them, didn’t surprise me at all. It was found that e-mail, teleconferencing, e-meetings, and team rooms were all effective ICTs in mitigating intercultural communicative barriers within GVTs. Without having to go through the entire testing process, one could look at the outline of the Shachaf study and use their common knowledge to hypothesize what the end result would be. It seems relatively understandable that ICTs such as e-mail and team rooms would assist heterogeneous work teams
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in being more efficient and effective on the job. The only concern I have with the results is that the ICTs found to be most effective were all digital in design, and face-to-face communication strategies were considered non-effective among the GVTs. What could occur is that nonverbal communication cues, because of these digital technologies, could be misinterpreted or taken out of context. This could cause major conflicts among group members, colleagues, or customers of an organization.

There are many times that I have come in contact with information and communication technologies being utilized in an intercultural professional environment. I was once part of an e-meeting at my first job (where I was a product salesman) and I was sitting in a meeting room with multiple other colleagues. On the screen in the room was the other end of the e-meeting call, which happened to be comprised of a group of Asian men who were interested in purchasing a large quantity our company’s products (heavy-duty metal cabinets). Because of a drastic language barrier and a poor digital video connection on the call, our company misinterpreted the order and sent the customer an incorrect quantity of the wrong product. Unfortunately, we lost that customer for good, as they felt they couldn’t rely on our company to provide them with the products they desired.

Without a doubt, modern technology can have a drastic effect on intercultural communication patterns (both verbal and non-verbal), as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of in-person and virtual work teams. We must be cognizant of both the capabilities and pitfalls of modern technology, as they say a lot about how we view ourselves and how we work with and view those around us.
References
