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The Invisible Pilot in Virtual Teams: An Investigation of the Impact of Facilitation on Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Although facilitation and leadership behaviors are thought to be critical to the success of virtual teams, little research has been done to examine the impact of facilitation behaviors on virtual teams. In order to fill this knowledge gap, this study empirically examines the impact of external facilitation behaviors on virtual team interactions and outcomes. Contrary to common belief, our findings suggest that high levels of external facilitation have negative impacts on relational outcomes, measured by team cohesion. Virtual teams with limited facilitation experienced higher levels of cohesion than virtual teams that were highly facilitated. Self facilitation behaviors were observed with virtual teams with limited external facilitation, which might serve virtual teams better than external facilitation.

Keywords:

Virtual teams, external facilitation, emergent facilitation behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological development has helped organizations to form teams regardless of the physical location of the members, assisting distributed team work (Griffith, Sawyer, and Neale, 2003). Consequently, virtual teams are becoming more ubiquitous, providing both opportunities and challenges for researchers as well as practitioners to improve their effectiveness (Powell et al. 2004). However, the virtual team context poses greater challenges to team members to communicate and exchange information, compared to the collocated context (Hightower and Sayeed, 1996; Yoo and Alavi, 2004). Therefore, while facilitation behaviors are found to be necessary in order to help move collocated teams forward, they are thought to be of more importance to virtual teams (Zigurs, 2003). However, facilitating and leading virtual teams are likely to take different forms and may evolve differently due to changes in the availability of information, the dispersion of the team, and the permanence of communications (Avolio and Kahai, 2003). While the role of an external facilitator has been shown to be beneficial in improving performance of computer-supported collocated teams, little research, particularly empirical research, has examined the impact of facilitation on virtual teams. In order to help fill this knowledge gap, we look at how facilitation influences group performance. Among different types of facilitation, we focus on group process facilitation. Particularly, the current study aims to address the following research question *“To what extent do different levels of group process facilitation influence the outcomes of virtual teams?”*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Facilitation in Collocated CMC Teams

A key factor that is critical in helping technology-mediated groups improve their communication process and ultimate performance is the external facilitator, acting as the leader to help drive groups forward (Griffith, Fuller, and Northcraft, 1998). The facilitator's role is to improve a group's communication and information flow. In essence, a facilitator makes it easier for groups to make decisions without making these decisions for the group. Facilitation helps the participants exploit

the capabilities of the technology and the skills inherent in their group in the pursuit of their tasks (Miranda and Bostrom, 1999).

Group facilitation existed well before the advent of collaborative technology. However, the role of the facilitator is thought to be more important with the increased use and the complexity of the technology (Griffith et al., 1998; Niederman et al. 1996). Research on facilitating technology-mediated groups has identified different types of facilitation (Clawson, Bostrom and Anson, 1993). Technical and process facilitation are the two key types of facilitation investigated (e.g. Dickson, Lee-Partridge, and Robinson, 1993; Griffith et al., 1998). While the goal of technical facilitation is to enhance groups' usage of communication technologies, the goal of process facilitation is to enhance group members' interaction with each other, helping groups in structuring the process by which they use technological tools (Clawson et al. 1993; Griffith et al. 1998). While both group process and technical facilitation roles provide opportunities for influencing group outcomes, we focus on group process facilitation due to its interactive and multi-dimensional nature (Griffith et al., 1998).

The facilitation process is a process during which an external facilitator influences the interaction behaviors of a team, helping to guide the group process in the desired direction. Therefore, the facilitator's ability to facilitate a team largely depends on the social interaction between the facilitator and team members. In order to facilitate a team, a facilitator must exert his/her social influence on the team's communication process. Drawing from different theories, previous research has investigated the sources of the facilitator's social influence on teams. Two of the social influence effects come from power and information processing (Griffith et al., 1998).

An external facilitator needs to have power over group members and the group's communication in order to be able to effectively facilitate the group process (Griffith et al., 1998). Three types of power are discussed by Griffith and her colleagues: legitimate power, expert power, and status power. Legitimate power is defined as the right to give orders, associated with control over rewards and punishments. A facilitator's legitimate power is perceived by group members as the right to structure the group's work. Expert power comes from the fact that the facilitator possesses knowledge and expertise that group members might not have. Therefore, knowledge and expertise carry the implicit risk that not following the person who "knows best" might result in negative consequences. It must be noted that the power of status is a secondary determinant of influence, which is the result of legitimate and expert power.

Besides having to possess power in order to be able to facilitate a group, a facilitator exerts his/her social influence via different forms of influence that derive from the information processing strategies of human decision makers (Griffith et al., 1998). One of these forms comes from the salience of the facilitator role within a group. In FtF groups, the facilitator is more salient than other group members due to his/her physical centrality as the legitimate authority who manages the meeting. Therefore, information from the facilitator will stand out, be more prominent, visible, and attention-grabbing than information from group members.

Facilitation and Virtual Team Outcomes

With the rapid commercial development of the Internet over the last decade, virtual teams have become increasingly more ubiquitous in many organizational settings. In the virtual team context, team members are not collocated in the same physical location, but are dispersed in different locations, working and collaborating over computer networks to accomplish specific goals. Since virtual team members typically cannot communicate with each other face-to-face, the nature of their communication differs from that of collocated teams (Yoo and Alavi, 2004). Consequently, the nature of facilitation in virtual teams can significantly differ from that in collocated teams - an issue that has seldom been addressed in research so far.

Previous research suggests that most shared understanding among group members occurs not via verbal (or typed for virtual teams) communication, but by exchanging social cues, including non verbal messages such as facial expression and tone of voice (Dennis and Wixom, 2002; Miranda and Bostrom, 1999). While being able to communicate and exchange information is essential for all group members, the virtual team context poses greater challenges to group members in terms of exchanging information and social cues (Hightower and Sayeed, 1996; Yoo and Alavi, 2004). Such teams take longer to complete tasks, develop relational ties and have greater difficulty reaching group consensus (McGrath and HollingShed, 1994; Walther, 1996). Due to these difficulties in discussion and exchanging information, it is essential for virtual teams to have someone to guide them through the team process. Researchers have often suggested that virtual teams are more autonomous or lack a formal leader (c.f. Balthazard, Waldman, Howell and Atwater, 2004), compared to collocated teams. However, assigned leader or not, leadership behaviors are necessary in order to move the team forward (Zigurs, 2003).

Although facilitation is believed to be critical to virtual teams in the pursuit of their tasks, the role of the external facilitator is likely to differ from that in the collocated team context. As discussed earlier, a facilitator needs to occupy a salient position

within the team and set up power and status in order to provide effective facilitation to the group. However, the set up of power, status and salient position relies heavily on the capability of the facilitator to closely communicate with group members to exchange information and various social cues, which are hindered by the dispersed location of virtual team members. Thus, the external facilitator in the virtual team context may have a less salient position within the team, compared to his/her collocated counterparts. In a virtual team, the external facilitator cannot occupy a central physical location like in a face-to-face context to directly communicate with group members. Therefore, online communication is the primary medium for the external facilitator to establish his/her salient role. However, research on self-managing teams suggests that team members communicate with each other more frequently than with an external source (Wageman, 2001). Consequently, an external facilitator in a virtual team context may have difficulty in establishing a salient role.

In addition, emergent leadership research suggests that virtual teams tend to be more self-managing (Wage, 2001) than their collocated counterparts. Therefore, group members tend to resist restrictiveness imposed by outsiders (Dickson et al. 1993). Since the power status of the facilitator may be reduced in the virtual team context, it is more likely that group members may resist restrictive facilitation efforts. Given the need for guidance, and the difficulty of establishing a strong external facilitator, group members may respond to no facilitation (or limited facilitation) by sharing the facilitation role among themselves. Thus, virtual team members are more likely to accept guidance from other team members, which is agreed mutually upon among themselves, than guidance which is forced upon them by an external source whose presence is not welcomed by team members (Wage, 2001; Zigurs, 2003).

Research Model and Hypotheses

Figure 1 represents our research model. The hypotheses will be developed based on the above discussed arguments to investigate the impact of different facilitation levels on different dimensions of virtual team outcomes.

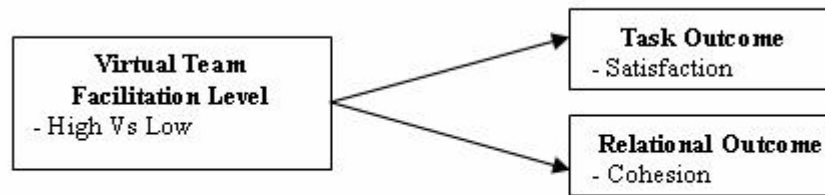


Figure 1. Research Model

Virtual team outcome dimensions

Previous GSS research has shown that group outcome is a multidimensional construct (Chang and Bordia, 2001). This study specifically investigates two dimensions of group outcome that have been investigated by previous research on GSS supported group facilitation: Relational outcome - measured by group cohesion, and task outcome - measured by group satisfaction (e.g. Anson et al., 1995; Miranda and Bostrom, 1999). A group’s relational outcome, which typically is captured via group cohesion, is one of the key group dimensions that GSS researchers have investigated. Developing a strongly cohesive team is often considered an important objective for achieving task success (Anson et al., 1995). Task outcome, which typically is captured via group members’ satisfaction with their final solution, is critical to the future successful implementation of the solution. Group satisfaction is also a good indicator of the group’s confidence in and commitment to the solution (Miranda and Bostrom, 1999).

Hypotheses

As discussed above, virtual team members are more likely to follow guidance given by team members than guidance forced upon them from an outside facilitator. Research focused on self-managing teams provides additional support for the concept of shared facilitation (Wageman, 2001). Therefore, emergent facilitation roles will play a more important role than external facilitators in virtual teams. Internal facilitating activities among virtual team members, thus, might prove to be more effective than external facilitating activities (Wageman, 2001). As a result, the role of the external facilitator would limit acceptance by members and prove to be difficult to implement in a virtual setting. In contrast, limited guidance would leave the team with greater level of freedom and flexibility to carry out its tasks, consequentially may serve a virtual team well.

Given that excessive restrictiveness may reduce the consensus within a team, it may result in group members feeling dissatisfied with the group's process and product. Hence we present:

Hypothesis 1: Highly facilitated virtual teams will experience lower levels of team cohesion compared to those with limited facilitation.

Hypothesis 2: Highly facilitated virtual teams will experience lower levels of satisfaction compared to those with limited facilitation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Data for the study were collected using a laboratory experiment described here. 84 undergraduate students enrolled in a systems analysis and design class at a European university participated in the study. The students were assigned to 14 six-member groups. Each group was convened, group members were introduced to each other and placed at six computer work stations in six separate rooms, making it impossible for them to see and communicate with each other during their session. The group members did not have prior experience working together.

The groups were required to finish a systems analysis and design task with a real organization. Each group was required to read through the case, identify the problems, prioritize critical problems, suggest possible alternative solutions for the most critical problems, select the most appropriate solutions, and prepare a report. Each group finished the task in a single three-hour session. Group members communicated via a computer network during their session. Students were recruited from a systems analysis and design class; thus the task was directly relevant to the students' experience and course of study, lessening the concerns about using student subjects (DeSanctis, 1989).

One expert analyst acted as the facilitator in all sessions. Seven groups received high levels of facilitation, while the other seven groups received low levels of facilitation. In the low level facilitation situation, the analyst's role was that of an outside observer, a time keeper. He did not actively participate in the process and was very passive. In the high level facilitation situation, the analyst's role was that of an engaged conductor, helping participants to understand their task and suggesting problem solving strategies. The analyst was actively guiding the meeting and behaved proactively. (See Appendix A for more detailed description of low and high levels of facilitation). Each group, regardless of the levels of facilitation received, used GroupSystems for Windows with the meeting structure embedded in the agenda. Also, a chat room capability was afforded to all groups as part of each GroupSystems module that they had to use.

Measures

Facilitation: Was captured by a dummy variable, with a value of 0 assigned to the seven groups which had limited facilitation, and 1 being assigned to the seven groups which were highly facilitated. Manipulation checks were included in the questionnaire. The facilitation conditions matched students' perceived levels of facilitation.

The research model includes two dependent variables: Cohesiveness and satisfaction with outcomes. These variables were measured after each session by asking participating students to fill out a questionnaire. Appendix B includes the questions used to measure the variables of cohesiveness and satisfaction, these items have been used in previous research (e.g. Chidambaram, 1996).

Cohesiveness: Was measured using a three-item construct with reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.61. Cohesiveness's scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater cohesiveness.

Satisfaction: Was measured with a four-item construct with reliability of 0.79. Satisfaction's scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction levels.

Analysis and Results

To test the impact of facilitation on the dependent variables, SPSS GLM analyses were run with facilitation condition as the independent variable. Two separate GLM models were run with the cohesion and satisfaction as the two dependent variables, unit of analysis is individual. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

Outcome Dimension	Facilitation Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation
Cohesion	Low	3.374	0.777
	High	3.190	0.891
Satisfaction	Low	3.506	1.062
	High	3.427	1.139

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Parameter		Cohesion	Satisfaction
Corrected Model	F	4.094	0.053
	p	0.047	0.819
Intercept	F	0.002	0.080
	p	0.963	0.777
Facilitation	F	4.094	0.053
	p	0.047	0.819
R Squared		0.055	0.001
Adjusted R Squared		0.041	-0.012

Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Parameter		Cohesion	Satisfaction
Intercept	B	-0.217	0.056
	p	0.169	0.718
[Facilitation=0]	B	0.443	-0.050
	p	0.047	0.919
[Facilitation=1]	B	0 (a)	0 (a)
	p		

a This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Facilitation:

- 0: Low facilitation.
- 1: High facilitation.

Table 3. Parameter Estimates

Table 2 presents tests of between-subjects effects. Facilitation condition has significant impact on cohesion (F = 4.094; p = 0.47), but not on satisfaction. Table 3 presents the parameter estimates for facilitation condition. Controlling for high facilitation condition, low facilitation has a positive beta, which means that teams with limited facilitation experienced higher level of cohesiveness, compared to highly facilitated ones, supporting hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 is not supported since the facilitation condition does not have significant impacts on satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to common belief and to previous findings with facilitation in collocated teams, our findings show that highly facilitated virtual teams experienced lower levels of team cohesion compared to those with limited facilitation. The findings suggest no significant impact of facilitation on satisfaction. It might be that the impact of the virtual team setting and condition on task outcomes, such as satisfaction, are mediated by other process variables such as conflict, which we did not investigate in this research. Future research can look at the impact of facilitation on such process variables, and their potential mediating effects.

The arguments we put forward for our hypotheses were based on the difficulty an external facilitator faces in facilitating virtual teams due to the nature of communication and dispersed location of team members, and the virtual teams' capability of self-facilitation. A qualitative investigation of the teams' conversation scripts shows that self-facilitation behaviors emerged in teams with limited facilitation. Some teams with limited facilitation managed to exercise self-facilitation well in carrying out their tasks. For example, the teams discussed how to set up the work process structures before moving on (e.g. "...first discussion then make a list...") and kept up with tracing the stages of their work process (e.g. "...at this moment we have to focus on the general idea..."; "...we are getting to the solution phase now. But may I remind you that we are still in problem identification...."). Also, team members engaged in conversation showed their efforts in giving quick feedback and suggestions in response to other team members' ideas (e.g. "...You could give me an answer, but instead you gave me so much more..."; "...To make the files electronically accessible you don't need to scan all documents with optical character recognition. A simple picture, read only, will do in most cases..."). Furthermore, team members also engaged in process facilitation activities, such as reminding team members about putting notes in the right place (e.g. "...Could everybody check where you leave a note? Some are being put at the wrong place (topic)..."), or drawing team members back to the task if they engaged in distracting activities (e.g. "...Archives.....please work and don't say nonsense..."; "...You're talking hardware in the software section!...").

The study's major contribution is that it is one of the first studies to empirically investigate the impacts of different levels of external facilitation on virtual teams. The findings show that different levels of facilitation have different impacts on relational outcomes, but not on task outcomes. Virtual teams that are supported with limited external facilitation can develop self-facilitation capabilities by having team members step forward to assume facilitation responsibilities to compensate for the limited guidance from an outside facilitator. Therefore, virtual teams with limited facilitation can deliver final tasks comparable to those delivered by teams that are highly facilitated. In addition, by developing self-facilitation capabilities, virtual team members are more connected to each other, increasing levels of team cohesion. Hence, it is clear that facilitation in virtual teams is different from facilitation in collocated teams.

From a practice perspective, our findings suggest that providing virtual teams with strong facilitation might not necessarily improve their final task outcomes. Furthermore, high levels of facilitation might be detrimental to virtual teams' relational development processes. While facilitation is necessary for virtual teams, the teams might be better off develop self-facilitation capabilities to drive them forwards, rather than being facilitated by an outsider. Therefore, managers working with virtual teams should be aware of the fact that providing virtual teams with high levels of facilitation might be detrimental rather than beneficial to the teams, particularly with tasks which require high levels of team collaboration and cohesiveness. Rather, managers should consider offering training in effective facilitation behavior to all members of virtual teams in their organization.

CONCLUSION

Facilitation is commonly believed to be important in improving CMC group outcomes (e.g. Griffith, 1998; Miranda and Bostrom, 1999). Previous empirical research has found significant positive impacts of external facilitation on collocated teams' outcomes. While facilitation is also believed to be critical in moving virtual teams forward (e.g. Zigurs, 2003), little has been done to empirically investigate the impacts of facilitation behaviors on virtual teams. Our research sheds some light on understanding the impacts of external facilitation behaviors on virtual team outcomes. Due to differences in the nature of communication and the dispersion of virtual team members, the impacts of external facilitation behaviors on virtual team outcomes has been found to be potentially different from that in collocated CMC team contexts. We expect that our findings will be interesting and useful to other scholars and will help draw more attention and empirical research efforts in furthering our understanding of the impacts of different facilitation behaviors in the virtual team context.

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Appendix A: Facilitation Treatment

Low facilitation	High facilitation
Analyst gives clarifying comments only	Analyst answers all questions and tries to “engage” the subjects
Analyst does not organize anything on idea lists or voting list	Analyst organizes problem and solution list as well as voting list
Analyst does not enforce game structure	Analyst enforces game structure in the sense that subjects have to put questions and ideas in designated items
Analyst does not give any clues	Analyst helps the subjects by offering an approach to handle the problem
Analyst does not police time; just lets subjects know when they’ll move on	Analyst warns subject that there are 20,10, and 5 minutes to go.
Analyst does not submit encouraging notes	Analyst submits encouraging notes
Analyst does not encourage individual players to contribute	Analyst encourages individual players to give their opinion and reactions; the chairman behavior
Analyst does not interfere	Analyst stops participants from fighting, joking, and flaming
Analyst does not call for reading breaks	Analyst calls for reading breaks to help participants build a complete picture of the information and ideas generated
Analyst does not influence pace of process	Analyst slows the process down when there is too much information coming in
Analyst does not provide information source suggestions	Analyst points out or suggests where individual players can get information, e.g. Archives should talk to Regulations
Analyst does not give process feedback and involvement	Analyst gives process feedback and involvement: This is what you have to do, what do you want to do next, etc.

Appendix B: Group Outcome Items

Group cohesiveness (Relational Outcome)

Do you feel that you were really part of your work group? Pick the statement that best matches your feeling:

- 6. Really part of my work group
- 5. Included in most ways
- 4. Included in some ways
- 3. Included in some ways, but not in others
- 2. Don't feel I really belong too much
- 1. Don't feel I belong at all

How does this group compare with other (student) groups in which you have been involved on each of the following points?

	Very much better (5)	Better than most (4)	About the same (3)	Worse than most (2)	Very much worse (1)
<u>Get along together</u>	-	-	-	-	-
<u>Help each other</u>	-	-	-	-	-

Group Satisfaction (Task Outcome)

	Strongly disagree	undecided	strongly agree
Overall, I was <u>personally satisfied</u> with the group experience	1	2	3 4 5
This group produced <u>useful results</u> during the meeting	1	2	3 4 5
I agree with the final recommendations of the group	1	2	3 4 5
Overall, I was satisfied with the process that our group followed	1	2	3 4 5