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VIRTUAL TRANSNATIONAL TEAMS AND THEIR USE OF ADVANCED INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Increasing globalization coupled with increasing use of communications and information technology has resulted in a relatively new phenomenon in organizations: the virtual transnational team. These are teams of people who work together toward a defined organizational mandate, but who are spread throughout the globe and whose work only sometimes brings them in face-to-face contact. These teams develop strategies, design and build products, service international clients, sell products and services, and so on. Their members remain connected through the use of advanced information and communications technologies such as e-mail, v-mail, video-conferencing, LotusNotes, and electronic meeting systems. Because of the fast pace of international business, it is critical that they execute their mandate effectively; however, because both the intensity of global competition and the technology are so new, we have little understanding of the most effective way of using information technologies to facilitate team interactions in successful transnational business. Our aim is to develop an understanding of the most effective team-technology configurations for transnational teams.

The theoretical model guiding this research uses the assumptions and framework of adaptive structuration theory. We propose that certain structural elements will influence a team's social interaction which in turn will affect its decision outcomes. Critical structural elements are the team's task and environment, characteristics of technology available to the team, and characteristics of the group itself. The social interaction elements are integration processes and actual technology use, and decision outcomes include quality of the team's output as well as member commitment and internal cohesion of the team. We propose that different social interaction processes will be most effective for teams with different structural characteristics. Furthermore, we propose that structural characteristics are likely to change over time, and that the team must adjust its social interaction processes to align better with its new structure to remain effective.

Because of the configurational nature of the propositions and the longitudinal element of the model, our initial empirical study employs a qualitative case-based approach. We examine three transnational teams within a Fortune 100 company. The teams are different in terms of the structural elements of task, task environment, and group characteristics. We measure the structural elements and social interaction using several different methodologies, including structured interviews, examination of archival and published material, questionnaires, logs and content of communications, and shadowing team members.

Our preliminary results indicate that social interaction processes are, indeed, different for different teams, even though their company environment and the technology available are identical. Moreover, the differences appear to be systematically related to the nationality of team members and type of task. For example, one team is a sales team that incorporates members from Scandinavian countries and the U.S. It uses informal weekly conference calls with very fluid agendas for most of its communication, and e-mail for the transmission of specific data to support or augment topics addressed in the conference calls. On the other hand, a product development team with several key members in Japan uses faxes almost exclusively for the transmission of information at a formal level (these are the only publicly recognized communications), but often uses phone and e-mail for informal communication.

By systematically linking effective social interaction processes with structural elements, we make practical recommendations for managers so they get the best from transnational teams.