

New technology will make it easier to work in multilingual teams

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When speaking on the phone, non-native speakers of a virtual team's working language need to process a foreign language, understand different accents and immediately respond to their conversation partner. If their communication is dealing with highly complex topics, the need to master linguistic challenges while simultaneously thinking and deciding about the task can easily create cognitive overload. To avoid these stressful situations, many members of multilingual teams prefer to communicate through email. Asynchronous and written exchanges allow them to compose messages in the foreign language at their own pace, to look up words in online dictionaries and to think about the responses they receive at rest. This strategy certainly relieves team members' brains for the moment, but it creates a daily flood of emails, which many find difficult to cope with.

Based on 54 interviews with the leaders and members of 13 global virtual teams in three automotive and three IT multinationals, we found that new communication technologies could resolve this dilemma. Periodical interviews over the past five years demonstrated that many companies have recently implemented corporation-wide chat systems, which allow employees to communicate in a written, but timely form. Many virtual team members use this medium during their entire working day, but find it particularly useful to sort out language-based misunderstandings during large teleconferences. Integrated web-based communication systems also enable video conferences, voice-over-IP telephony, screen- and file-sharing across multiple locations. Teammates frequently use these features to repeat the same message through different communication channels. Whereas this practice may at first glance appear inefficient, it fosters mutual understanding in virtual communication across language barriers.

Practical recommendations

Tolerate the media choices of team members who struggle with the working language. Many team leaders and members with high proficiency in the official working language become impatient if their less fluent colleagues rely too much on written communication. These employees should understand the cognitive challenges of processing a foreign language and tolerate their teammates' preference for writing emails, as these "unhurried" media can assist mutual understanding.

Say the same thing twice through several media. Many managers feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive, so repeating messages through different media is often considered inefficient. However, this practice can help to bridge language barriers. Repeating messages through several communication channels prevents costly misunderstandings and improves knowledge sharing in multilingual virtual teams. This additional “safety net” also reduces language-based anxiety among team members and fosters trust between colleagues. Therefore, not only the less proficient team members, but also fluent and native speaking colleagues should repeat messages to ensure understanding.

Invest in the corporate media infrastructure. Multinational corporations should invest in integrated web-based communication systems such as Microsoft Lync, IBM Verse or HP Virtual Rooms, as these technologies mitigate the omnipresent language barriers in cross-border communication by providing multiple communication channels. IT corporations are already on the cutting edge in this respect, but many automakers are introducing these technologies only now. Further investments in the communication infrastructure could help to leverage the large performance potential of multilingual virtual teams.

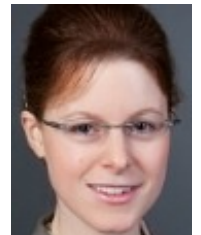
Motivate and enable employees to adopt new media. Whereas the younger generation of “digital natives” is usually highly skilled in the use of new media, some older employees are unwilling or unable to use innovative communication systems to their full advantage. To facilitate their participation in virtual communication, team leaders need to champion the use of integrated communication systems as tools to overcome language barriers and explain the benefits of communicating through several different channels. Multinational companies should also provide training and computer support while ensuring that newly introduced communication systems are compatible with the existing IT infrastructure, with work tasks and the corporate communication culture.



Notes:

- This article is based on the authors' paper [Media choice in multilingual virtual teams](#), *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 47, Issue 4, 427-452. DOI: 10.1057/jibs.2016.13
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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