

Interpersonal Trust in Virtual Software Development Teams: A Systematic Mapping Study

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Abstract—Context: The progress of Information and Communication Technologies has greatly promoted the relationships among people of different geographical regions. Under this novel context, new settings of software development arise, known as virtual teams, a team of geographically dispersed developers.

Objective: to assess the impact of virtual team's interpersonal trust on software development process.

Method: We conducted a systematic mapping study of peer-reviewed literature up to August 2016.

Results: We reviewed 41 primary studies. Some highlights are that virtual team effectiveness is the most affected aspect by the lacking of interpersonal trust, while face-to-face meeting is the most mentioned work strategy to mitigate this problem.

Conclusions: This study corroborates the impact of interpersonal trust on virtual software development teams. We identified some work strategies but few advanced tools to mitigate the problems derived from the lack of interpersonal trust.

Index Terms—evidence-based software engineering, interpersonal trust, software development, systematic mapping study, virtual teams.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE progress of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has greatly promoted the relationships (social, work, business, etc.) among people of different geographical regions, creating new technological, cultural and organizational challenges. This has led to the emergence of virtual work teams in the software development business, a group of developers who work geographically distributed.

Trust is a crucial aspect in virtual teams, where members are geographically dispersed and communicate primarily through ICT [1].

Existing relationships among members of virtual teams are very different from traditional collocated teams. To create and maintain trust in virtual teams is more difficult. Geographical distance, time difference and cultural diversity could reduce the possibilities for the growth of trust among the members of virtual teams.

Mayer et al. [2] define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party".

Trust allows people to participate in risky activities that

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they cannot control or monitor and even in which they may be disappointed by the actions of others [3], [4].

In interpersonal relationships, trust can be qualified as emotional (or based on affection and emotions) or cognitive (based on knowledge, responsibility, ability, etc.) [5], [6]. Trust affects performance of the work teams [7], [8], [9], even more when the tasks are highly interdependent [10], [11]. Trust is a critical aspect to improve intra and inter-institutional cooperation, coordination and control [12].

The purpose of this work is to identify and classify reported knowledge about the impact of virtual team's interpersonal trust on software development process. To achieve that purpose we applied a research technique known as Systematic Mapping Studies (SMS), also known as Scope Studies, to review the scientific, peer-reviewed literature, select relevant studies and extract data of interest from them. SMS provides a structure for research reports and results that have been published, by categorizing them and often giving a visual summary, the map, of the results [13]. The aim of a SMS, as a research method, is to identify all the evidence related to a specific topic, i.e., to answer broad questions related to trends in research or to provide a state-of-the-art of a discipline, it is also a good mechanism to detect research gaps [14].

The rest of this work is structured as follows: section 2 presents results from other related works; in section 3, we detail the SMS process; section 4 presents the results, while section 5 offers a discussion about these results and their impact. In section 6, we expose threats to validity in this SMS. Finally, section 7 presents the conclusions.

II. RELATED WORKS

After conducting pilot searches in several electronic data sources (online databases, publisher sites and general search engines), we have found three secondary studies about interpersonal trust in virtual software development teams.

The study of Niazi et al. [15], presents a systematic literature review aimed to identify important factors for establishing trust in offshore software outsourcing relationships. In that paper, trust is analyzed for the client-vendor's relationship and is defined as clients and vendors having positive expectations of each other's actions. The authors discovered that factors such as: face-to-face meeting, better communication, contract management between client and vendor, defining process tools, procedures and policies and reliable management, play an important role in establishing trust between clients and vendors, in the context of offshore software outsourcing relationships. Their paper only considers trust between clients and vendors.

The work from Chatfield et al. [16] addressed again re-

search question: What are the organizational challenges in creating business value from leveraging virtual teams in the organization? In order to answer this question, the authors conducted a systematic review of the existing literature on virtual teams to identify the key organizational challenges. Their study analyzed papers about virtual teams that have been published from 2004 to 2012. Four key organizational issues: communication, people and skills, trust and knowledge, were identified and discussed. Their work concludes that trust and knowledge cannot be disregarded, as no organization can drive the performance without trusting the team. They analyzed interpersonal trust in virtual teams within organizations in general. We believe that virtual software development teams (VSDT) have particular organizational characteristics as less work stability, higher training to proper use of communication tools, more collaborative activities, etc. These characteristics could affect interpersonal trust and thus obtain different results with respect to organizations in general.

The goal of Da Silva et al.'s paper is "to build an evidence-based model of DSD project management from the research findings about challenges of DSD and the practices, models and tools proposed and used to overcome these challenges" [17]. The authors based the construction of their model on the evidence collected and synthesized by a comprehensive SMS, containing 70 research papers published between 1997 and 2009. Cultural differences, issues of trust, differences in knowledge levels, and language barriers are cited as causes of poor or ineffective communications, as well as the lack of synchronous communication. Temporal, geographical, and socio cultural distances exacerbate problems of trust, cohesion, and conflicts with negative impact on communication, cooperation, coordination, and general management issues. Specifically, about trust, this work identifies practices and traditional communication tools that would favor the interpersonal trust in DSD. The main practices identified to promote interpersonal trust are: provision of and training in collaboration and coordination tools, use and maintain common software process among work sites and divide the work into well-defined modules and carry out progressive integration. The most important communication tools identified are: phone (including teleconference and audio conference), emails and video conference. In all cases, these tools are supported in traditional (non-innovative) technology. The results obtained with this SMS are valuable to the scientific community; however, we consider it necessary to analyze other aspects of the trust in VSDT. For instance, work strategies and innovative communication tools to promote trust in VSDT, software development activities most impacted by interpersonal trust.

In our study, we expose a comprehensive analysis about interpersonal trust in VSDT involving those aspects and updating the results until August 2016.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of this SMS is to identify and classify reported knowledge about the impact of virtual team's interpersonal trust on software development activities. We are interested in the analysis of the effects of interpersonal trust, work strategies and advanced tools promoting interpersonal trust, af-

ected software development activities by interpersonal trust and most involved countries in field studies about interpersonal trust.

In this section, we present the conducting phase of our SMS. Fig 1 shows the steps of our protocol, which is grounded on the guidelines proposed in [14]. We use seven search engines: ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Wiley InterScience, SCOPUS, IEEEExplorer, ACM Digital Library and Google Scholar.

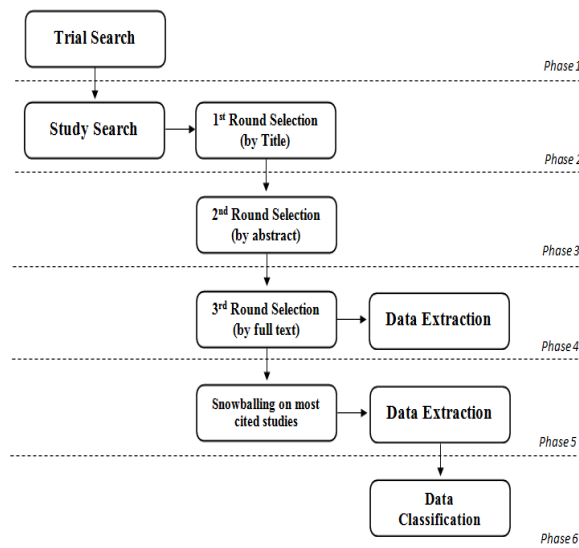


Fig. 1. SMS execution process

Study search, is the final search in the selected search engines. From them, we obtain a set of candidate papers. Then we conduct three rounds of paper selection, including selection by title (1st round), selection by abstract (2nd round), and selection by full text (3rd round). In phase 4, we extract data relevant to our research.

In phase 5, we apply snowballing technique [18] to the most cited paper of selected studies.

A. Research and Publication Questions

We defined a set of four research questions (RQ) which makes a full coverage of the goal. Two publication questions (PQ) were also included to cover the demographic information. These questions are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION QUESTIONS

Question	
RQ1	Which aspects of the software development process are affected by the interpersonal trust within virtual teams?
RQ2	Which work strategies have been used to support interpersonal trust within virtual software development teams?
RQ3	Which kinds of tools have been used to support interpersonal trust within virtual software development teams?
RQ4	What are the most reported software development activities related to interpersonal trust within virtual teams?
PQ1	What are the most active countries researching interpersonal trust within virtual software development teams?
PQ2	When the 59 selected studies have been published?(Journal or Conference)

B. Search strategy

In this section, we describe the search scope and strategy. About scope, the aim is to analyze all the scientific literature existing with regard to interpersonal trust within virtual teams. The search was limited to the computer science field and papers published in peer-reviewed conferences or journals.

To construct the set of search terms we used the PICOC technique (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome and Context) [19]. This technique supports the selection and classification of the search terms. We structured the search string as follows:

Population: {software, system} development.

Intervention: trust, confidence.

Outcomes: impact on software development.

Context: {virtual, global, distributed, remote, offshore} team.

The final search string was built connecting all the facets of PIOC (we do not use Comparison) by Boolean AND connectors:

("software development" OR "system development") AND (trust OR confidence) AND (impact) AND ("virtual" OR "global" OR "distributed" OR "remote" OR "offshore") AND (team)

The search string was run on the titles, keywords, and abstracts in IEEEExplore, Science Direct and SCOPUS. In the other electronic databases (i.e., ACM Digital Library, SpringerLink and Wiley InterScience), the search string was run only on the titles and abstracts due to the limitations of the search engines. In Google Scholar the search was run on studies' titles only.

We found 180 non-duplicated studies. This set of candidate studies was the main input to the next phase, selection of works.

C. Selection phase

The purpose of the selection process is to build up a set of relevant papers, by applying inclusion/exclusion criteria to the studies retrieved by the searches. The main researcher (first author) defined the inclusion/exclusion criteria, which was reviewed and agreed by the other three authors. These criteria are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA

#	Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
IC1	Papers written in English.
IC2	Papers published in Journals indexed by the JCR or in International Conferences with a peer-reviewed acceptance system.
IC3	Papers focused in interpersonal trust, virtual teams and software development.
EC1	Grey literature (slides presentations, tutorials, forewords, keynote speeches, letters, etc.)
EC2	Short papers (less than 4 pages)

Selection phase involved three iterations: 1st round selection (considering only the paper's title), 2nd round selection (including the abstract) and 3rd round selection (reading the full text). The four authors, splitted into two teams and working independently, conducted these iterations. From that, we selected 34 primary studies.

In order to validate/extend this automated search strategy,

we applied the snowballing technique, following the guidelines in [18]. We use the most cited study (S38, with 50 citations) as a seed, obtaining 7 additional studies. Finally, 41 works were included in the selected studies set (see Appendix).

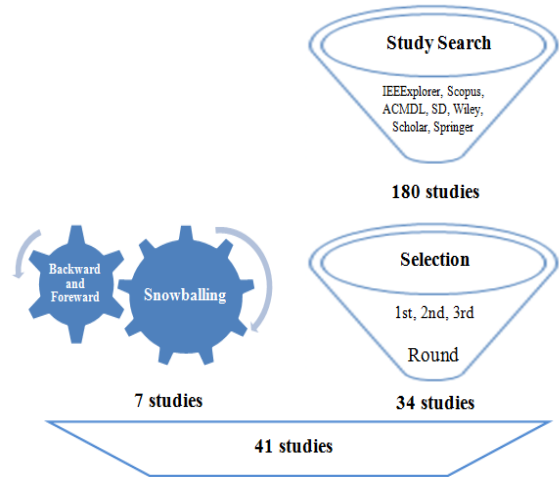


Fig. 2. Results of selection phases

D. Data extraction

The extraction of data was carried out by reviewing the selected studies. The full text of each study was read to extract data to answer every RQs and PQs listed in section 3.1. The data items to be extracted from each paper are shown in Table 3. To keep traceability between processes, an identifier code (Sn) was assigned to each selected study.

TABLE 3. DATA ITEMS TO BE EXTRACTED FROM THE STUDIES.

#	Data Item	Description	Relevant to
D1	Title	The title of the paper.	Overview
D2	Authors List	The full name of all authors of the paper.	Overview
D3	Abstract	The abstract of the paper.	Overview
D4	Year	year when the paper was published	Overview
D5	Involved Countries	The countries where interpersonal trust within virtual software development teams had been investigated.	PQ1
D6	Venue	The name of the venue where the study was published	PQ2
D7	Type of Venue	Journal or Conference	PQ2
D8	Affected Aspects	The aspects of the software development process that were affected by the interpersonal trust within virtual teams	RQ1
D9	Work strategies	The work strategies that have been used to support interpersonal trust within virtual software development teams.	RQ2
D10	Tools	The name of the tool that have been used to support interpersonal trust in virtual software development teams.	RQ3
D11	Software Development Activities	The software development activities affected by the interpersonal trust within virtual teams.	RQ4

F. PQ2: Where the selected studies have been published (Journal or Conference)?

We found that 30 papers (73% of total) have been published in conferences, from these, 6 papers were published in the IEEE International Conference on Global Software Engineering.

Fig.4 shows the number of the selected studies published until August 2016, with two major peaks in 2008 and 2012.

TABLE 9. VENUE

Venue	Studies
Conferences	S1, S2, S3, S6, S7, S8, S10, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S19, S21, S22, S23, S24, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S31, S34, S35, S36, S39, S41
Journals	S4, S5, S9, S11, S18, S20, S32, S33, S37, S38, S40

Fig. 5 shows that 8 selected studies involved students as empirical subject and 29 studies involved practitioners from the software industry.

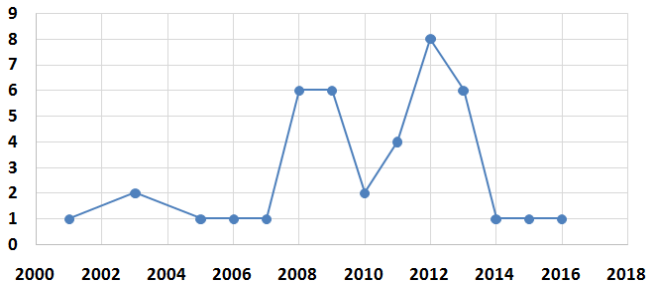


Fig. 4. Number of the selected studies over time period

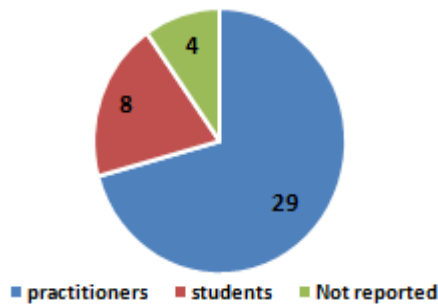


Fig. 5. Number of the selected studies over empirical subject types

V. DISCUSSION

As a general aspect, we think that the number of papers we select (41) for this study is low, and does not allow to argue about possible generalizations of the results obtained. Even the number of non-duplicate works found was low (180), considering the importance that several authors assign to the subject in their works' introduction sections. Our opinion is that interpersonal trust in virtual development teams has not been thoroughly investigated, despite the fact that all authors point out the strong impact it has on software development, both in productivity and quality.

The evidence does not seem to support these investigators' claims about the impact of interpersonal trust. Only nine of the 41 selected papers reported some effects on

the development process. Five papers mention "effectiveness", and argue that there is a direct correlation between interpersonal trust and effectiveness, although not a causal relationship. According to the results, the effectiveness of virtual teams is the most affected aspect by the lacking of interpersonal trust. Our SMS shows the importance of interpersonal trust in the performance of virtual teams. While the causes cannot be generalized to other environments, other studies (e.g. [20], [21], [22], [23]) achieved similar results for collocated work teams. There seems to be a similarity between the factors of software development that are affected by the lack of interpersonal trust in both contexts.

Three studies (S6, S16, S39) show that teams with high interpersonal trust facilitate information sharing among their members as well as by fosters norms of reciprocity, motivating collaboration and coordination, and reducing interpersonal conflicts. While low interpersonal trust entails team members to show lack of commitment to the work, be less focused to project goals and do not keep customers involved in the project implementation.

Only two papers (S16, S36) mention motivation, and aspects such as supervision, cost estimation and team conflicts resolution only deserve the attention of one paper each. Factors such as productivity, quality of the final product, reduction of development time, time-to-market or stay within budget, do not seem to be important; at least we have not found any mention of them in the 41 works analyzed.

Face-to-face meeting is the most mentioned work strategy to mitigate the lack of interpersonal trust. However, face-to-face meetings are very costly, and difficult to do with dispersed teams. We believe that communication tools, adding new features such as emotion detection, social computing, pervasive computing, measurement of interactions, measurement of trust among team members, remote awareness, etc., would significantly improve the building and maintenance of trust in virtual teams.

Concerning work strategies, future research should analyze the relationship between work context (team size, cultural diversity, task distributions, software domain, etc.) and suitable strategy kinds for this context. This knowledge will be very useful for practitioners.

We found only four studies mentioning work strategies based on software tools, especially tools that support coordination, group awareness and communications. There are no evidence that allows setting a correlation between used software tools and the level of interpersonal trust. A systematic review of the literature to identify the current weaknesses of such tools and synthesize possible solutions may be worth taking.

About the most reported software development activities related to interpersonal trust, we found that there is a wide diversity of activities (8) and the majority (6 out of 8) is reported by only one paper. It seems to indicate that the virtual teams work in all phases of the process and that interpersonal trust is relevant to the whole cycle of software development.

Project management and requirement engineering are the most reported activities. These activities involve a high interaction between stakeholders. It seems that interpersonal trust plays a main role in this type of activities and is less

important in activities with few interactions, such as programming.

Regarding the project management activities, we identified a special interest in leadership styles in virtual teams. One study (S34) concludes that the supportive leaderships, i.e. managers strive to achieve consensus, and concerned about the well-being and satisfaction of team members, are more suitable for virtual teams. While other studies (S9, S26) show that in some cases authority leadership generates more trust to the members of the team, for example teams with a high cultural diversity. There is no consensus about how the leadership must be and more research is needed on this topic.

Beyond the analysis of interpersonal trust, we detect that while there are many countries (27) where field studies have been carried out, India and USA are clearly the most reported ones. Analyzing the global software development connections among geographical regions is interesting to note that Eastern Asia is highly connected with Europe and North (Anglo) America, in spite of the great cultural differences.

Seventy percent of the selected papers were field studies, specifically from software industry. Thus, the results of this SMS reach a high degree of empirical validity.

The authors of the majority of selected studies (73%) have preferred to publish in conferences rather than in journals, this is compatible with research practices in Computer Sciences and Information Systems. Conferences are the ideal venue for professionals to meet and discuss, face to face, about new trends, technologies, tools, pitfalls and so on.

VI. THREATS TO VALIDITY

The most frequent threats to validity are:

- Descriptive validity: threats associated with the description of data and observations (potential bias of the researchers),
- Theoretical validity: two different activities can be affected, the identification/selection of papers (missed studies) and data extraction and classification (researcher's bias),
- Interpretive validity: conclusions drawn are reasonable given the data (researcher's bias),
- Repeatability: the possibility that other researchers obtain the same results by following the same processes (lack of details).

To minimize these potential threats to the validity of this work, we developed a standard form for data extraction and analysis (DEF). All authors, independently, filled out this DEF and the first author integrated the results. When discrepancies arose over the interpretation of the data, they were resolved through meetings. The calculation of the Fleiss' kappa [25] for these activities reached a value of 82% in agreement. Hence, we consider this threat is well controlled.

The use of several sources for the automatic search of the primary papers, and a second search strategy (snowballing) to complement the results, reduce the risk of missing some important work. On the other hand, the number of papers selected and analyzed (41 papers) reduces the threat to theoretical validity, since the impact of the loss of a data, given the number of samples, is insignificant.

To reduce researchers' bias during the identification and selection process, we created two groups, with two researchers each. Each group carried out the selection process independently, on the total of the papers identified by the search strategies (100% overlap). Within the groups, each researcher performed the work, independently, with a degree of overlap of 50% of the papers retrieved by the searches. Finally, the first author performed the integration of the results and calculated the degree of inter-group and inter-researchers agreement.

To facilitate the repetition of the study, we will provide all interested researchers with additional material, including a detailed protocol, search strings, inclusion / exclusion criteria and the DEF with all the extracted data.

VII. CONCLUSION

This work presents the results of a SMS on interpersonal trust in virtual software development teams. The study identifies the impact of interpersonal trust on global software process activities.

Lacking of trust affects the VSDT effectiveness, risking the success of the global software engineering processes. The main proposal to mitigate this problem remains the traditional face-to-face meetings. Given the high costs of holding face-to-face meetings, a new research area that promotes the use of advanced technology-based tools, to construct and keep interpersonal trust in VSDT, seems promising. However, these tools should take into account the cultural differences of users, and intelligently reduce the risks of misunderstandings.

We consider that more research work is needed, more structured, with specific and relevant data on the impact of interpersonal trust. Researchers need a better description of the context and the reported experience. A point to emphasize is the lack of works that replicate experiments, in order to validate results obtained by previous research.

As future work, we will conduct a multinational survey to identify key aspects of interpersonal trust in virtual teams. We are also planning to conduct an experiment involving practitioners from America, Europe and Oceania, to assess the impact of trust level in specific development tasks.

APPENDIX SELECTED STUDIES

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