



TURUN KAUPPAKORKEAKOULU
Turku School of Economics

Acquiring skills for virtual multicultural teams through a business game

Iris Fischlmayr, *Assistant professor*
Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria, e-mail:
iris.fischlmayr@jku.at

Satu Lähteenmäki, *Professor*
Turku School of Economics, Turku, Finland, e-
mail:satu.lahteenmaki@tse.fi

ICEB + eBFR 2006 Conference 28.11.-1.12.2006,
Tampere, Finland



WHY THIS TOPIC?

Despite the rapid change towards virtual teams and project organizations and the growing interest towards researching virtual organizations, there still are:

- Failures in building virtual multicultural teams
- Lack of knowledge and research on virtual multicultural communication
- Urgent need for high level training for virtual multicultural teams



THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are two parallel schools of research on virtual organizations

- the information systems approach
 - puts the emphasis on the new technology and ICT solutions as the elements of virtual working context
- the organizational behavior approach
 - focuses on the human aspects of working in virtual organization

This paper is linked to the latter one



VIRTUAL TEAM

= a group of knowledge workers who are geographically and/or organizationally, but many times also temporally dispersed and brought together across time and space by the help of ICT to work together on important tasks while physically remaining apart.

All the networking (i.e. communicating, gathering and sharing information, collaborating and making decisions) primarily takes place without face-to-face contact of the team members



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to analyze typical behavioral factors coming up in virtual multicultural teams in order to find innovative ways to train team members and leaders to acquire skills required for efficient virtual multicultural teamwork and communication.



METHOD AND PROCESS (1)

Step 1.

Virtual Team Project as a Research and Training Experiment

- Amongst business students at TSE, Finland and JKU, Austria
- Consisting of an online business game RealGame™ and some training sessions
- Involves the participants in continuous real-time decision making on typical business processes in a multinational production company
- Team members are confronted with challenges stemming from cultural differences and physical distance within and between teams



METHOD AND PROCESS (2)

Four types of teams, 3-4 members each
6-8 teams in one game

mono-cultural & physically in one location

mono-cultural & physically dispersed

multi-cultural & physically in one location

multi-cultural & physically dispersed

Communication and negotiations within
(dispersed teams) and with other teams due
to physical distance only via electronic
media (e-mail, Skype voice/chat)



METHOD AND PROCESS (3)

Step 2.

Virtual team training and research sessions carried out in real teams of MNCs

- Role plays,
- mini-cases,
- discussions,
- simulation games
- as well as theoretical knowledge

Step 3.

Second simulation game with the same teams, now more challenging decisions and accelerated pace of time



DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

Experimental design of VMT

- Virtual communication
- Negotiation and decision making
- Multicultural composition
- Observation during the game
- Diary kept during the game
- Reflective essays written after the game
- Surveys (ad hoc)
- Qualitative interviews

Grounded theory method

- used in order to detect factors contributing to team processes and team dynamics in virtual multicultural teams
- line-by line coding of reflective essays
- meanings, explanations, situational and contextual factors

I.e. validation through triangulation and processual method



TENTATIVE RESULTS

Themes that came up as important factors for the team cooperation were

- team leadership
- decision-making democracy
- power distribution
- trust
- the role of language
- technical problems and
- issues associated with virtual and cross-cultural communication

As such this was not new, as similar things have come up in previous studies also



What makes it interesting, is **to show the differences:**

How these factors come up, how they influence the team roles/ performance/ commitment/ communality/ results and what they mean for members with different cultural background.

Playing RealGame makes these not only visible but also self-experienced and helps the team members to:

- learn more about their own team,
- avoid misinterpretation and
- develop efficient ways of working despite of them.



E.g. Need for **leadership** and bases for it

“The only thing why I participated was that we had an autocratic leader.” (French)

“We did not have a leader because of the fact that none of us had bigger knowledge than the others.” (Finn)

Trust: me or others?

“After we had played a while we started to make decisions more independently” ... “When we cannot meet face to face we must have trust to people with who we work.” (Finn – own team showing trust)

*“I personally like to know the people who I negotiate with.”,
“You also do not see your partner you do not see the non-verbal communication which is very important. You do not know if you can trust such a partner.” (Austrian – need to know whether to trust the counterpart)*



voice + power – silence + otherness/withdrawal

“For the first time ever I realized that there is a strong connection between language skills and the distribution of power within a group.”

“It is important to speak ‘the same language’. The Finns wanted formal and brief messages [...].”

“We tried Skype but the Finns were not interested. Thus, we had to communicate with them by e-mail, it was much more difficult.”



LESSONS LEARNED FROM PILOTING THE TRAINING PROGRAM

1. larger teams (4-6) are needed in order to provoke conflict and get dynamics
2. Give even more detailed instructions of the game and exercises
3. rehearsing the game before the start-up by using stand-alone version
4. Arrange a planning session for teams to develop strategies and tactics
5. Arrange a communication session for teams to familiarise
6. Extend the training session to last a whole day thus enabling variation of exercises.
7. Cut off the possibility to buy from the open market and force the teams to buy from sub-contractor teams
8. Consider forming teams according to professional expertise (in natural teams)