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The Role of Technology, Communication and Social Capital in Distributed Teams

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in communication technologies continue to support the development of geographically-distributed teams. Yet as this practice grows, managers and staff remain concerned about the impact of working physically away from each other. This study theorizes social capital as the primary mechanism by which the level of distribution of individuals in teams and the use of communication technologies influence the work-related outcomes of job performance, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Three components of social capital are examined: structural, relational and cognitive. I use social network methodology to capture differences in face-to-face versus technology-mediated communication networks in a survey of over 250 knowledge workers and managers in 18 groups in 9 organizations. Analysis of the data includes structural equation and hierarchical linear models to test for latent variables, paths and multilevel effects. Preliminary results show that structural, relational and cognitive social capital vary in their effects on performance. I also find that face-to-face and technology-mediated structures function as distinct and separate sources of social capital. The results assist managers in further understanding how technology use and team organization relate to performance in distributed teams. Methods are suggested that managers can use to evaluate and improve individual and team social capital.