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FACILITATING DIVERSE VIRTUAL IT TEAMS

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ABSTRACT
Video conferencing has been around for decades. The usage of this technology increased tremendously due to the 2020 COVID pandemic. Virtual teams are more the norm now than ever before. Project success has been affected by the move towards online meetings more specifically the facilitation of those meetings. This paper reviews research findings relevant to virtual facilitation with human facilitators while acknowledging industry research on effective facilitation needs. Finally, it offers a proposition for research regarding the success of facilitated diverse virtual IT teams in a virtual environment using Microsoft (MS) Teams.

Keywords
Facilitator, Virtual Teams, Video Conferencing, Group Support Systems, Shared Mental Models, Team Identity, Global Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION
The 2020 pandemic has brought a lot of changes in how business is conducted globally. When the world was locked down due to the spread of COVID 19, businesses evolved by moving to virtual platforms. Things may never go back to the way they were pre-March 2020. Current viral mutations and employees desire to work remotely or leave their current employment are presenting businesses with a need to consider working virtually as a way of doing business in the future. With this change, the facilitation of the one crux of today’s business, meetings, is crucial.

Through the years there have been many studies on the facilitation of meetings with intent on increasing project success. These studies focused on how meetings should be facilitated [11], the software used during facilitation [13], the use of Group Support Systems (GSS) to improve process facilitation [14] and even International Association of Facilitators (IAF) best practices for virtual meeting facilitation [15]. Due to the pandemic, numbers have risen drastically in the use of online video conferencing. In 2019, MS Teams usage was reported at 20 million users with an increase to 75 million in April 2020 to as many as 145 million by April of 2021 [3,12]. The need to continue working remotely increased the number of meetings in the month of March 2020 from a little over half a billion to 2.7 billion by March 31, 2020 [3]. Johnson and Lee’s [10] study of shared mental models (SMM) and online team-based task performance resulted in finding a strong correlation between SMM and team performance.

With such a huge increase in usage of MS Teams, the effect on SMM is unknown. This time in history has ushered in new issues such as mental & physical fatigue, social and managerial issues and possibly more [11, 6, 18]. There are so many different industries using virtual conferencing software. This review was to work on exhausting the literature regarding human IT facilitators and their effects on virtual teams leading towards the question:

What is the effect of human facilitators on diverse virtual IT team mental model using MS Teams?

If facilitators have adapted successfully to this required virtual environment, then perhaps best practices for IT virtual team facilitation can be identified. By studying the literature to date, research methodologies can be reviewed to find the most relevant method for a future study regarding current facilitator success.

The purpose of this review is to offer a proposition for research regarding the success of facilitated diverse virtual IT teams by reviewing GSS and SMM in a virtual environment. The suggestion is a team-level study using qualitative analysis with virtual IT project teams who have used MS Teams as their platform. Interviews of the team members could be conducted or possibly case-based analysis of these teams when investigating the success or failure of a project using MS Teams. This contribution is
useful for researchers as well as practitioners as it could provide them with information on what is needed to ensure human facilitators of IT virtual teams are successful in completing their objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Term Definitions

Virtual Teams

There are many definitions for virtual teams. For the purpose of this review the definition used is “distributed work teams whose members are geographically dispersed and coordinate their work predominantly with electronic information and communication technologies (e-mail, video-conferencing, telephone, etc.)” [1, 9].

Today 25% of meetings are held online and the projection is that number will rise by 5% by 2024 [5]. Although a 5% increase may seem small, if the latest figure from March 2020 were used the increase would equal to another 100 million minutes or 1.67 million hours more per day in meetings held with virtual teams. Virtual teams are very relevant to the success of organizations [16]. The need to extend the current best practices or determine if there are others that relate solely to virtual teams is evident. Research around the potential challenges caused by video conferencing is encouraged for better understanding of the impact [11]. With a market that has many platforms that have seen similar growth narrowing down the technology will help in ensuring future studies are congruent.

Diverse Teams

For the purpose of this study we identify diverse teams as Global Virtual Teams. Focusing on a portion of the Pinjani & Palvia [17] definition GVTs as groups that (a) are identified by their organizations as being a team; (b) use technology-supported communication; and (c) work- and live-in different countries. “Compared to virtual and collocated traditional teams, GVTs connect people across organizational units whose policies, systems, and structures may not mesh together easily. They involve people from multiple disciplines, functions, location, and culture; organizations work together on specific opportunities. Also, their major use of electronic medium is to aid the GVTs; team members must operate quickly and effectively and this requires high levels of technological support” [17].

Technology

Hayden et. al [8] defines Group Support Systems as “collaborative software tools that can be used to focus and structure a team’s deliberation, while minimizing costs and distractions among teams working collaboratively.” In October 2021, Gartner studied as unified communication services worldwide and their results from the study of 15 meeting solutions identified three market leaders. MS Teams, Cisco and Zoom were ranked as the leaders in video conferencing due to their ability to execute and completeness of vision. Completeness of vision was determined by customer purchasing and usage requirement and assessing the ability of the software being evaluated to line up with these requirements. Gartner also considered the vendors investment in their product and how they accurately assess the meeting market. Ability to execute was determined by the vendor product capability functionally both advanced and basic, financial viability, customer experiences based on rollout and adoption enterprise solution support, scale and security characteristics [5]. Zoom was ranked highest in the completeness of vision and MS Teams ranked highest in their ability to execute as a meeting solution.

MS Teams was chosen as a platform of interest due to its availability in over 181 countries and translation into 44 languages [3]. In 2019, MS Teams usage was reported at 20 million users with an increase to 75 million in April 2020 to as many as 145 million by April of 2021 [3, 12]. The need to continue working remotely increased the number of meetings in the month of March 2020 from 0.56 billion meeting minutes to 2.7 billion meeting minutes per day by March 31, 2020 [3]. These numbers represent a 13.8 percent growth in the number of users and a 20.7 percent growth in the number of meetings conducted in one month in 2020.

Facilitation of Virtual Teams

Through the years many types of facilitated teams have been studied. In 2014, Global virtual teams (GVT) engaged in software development were researched using quantitative data. The results were analyzed in several ways including path modeling, Partial Least Square and analysis such as confirmatory factor and reliability. The results showed different issues can arise due to the characteristics of these teams which were defined as having members from different countries and cultures [7]. The software used was not the focal point of the study but rather the team member’s perception of GVT on their ability to accomplish their task or perform as a team.
McQuaid et al., [13] published in 2000 a study regarding virtual meeting tools. Their study suggests there would be positive implications in implementing virtual reality and persistent visualization into virtual meetings. The intent as to create a comfortable environment with shared workspace that would feel familiar to the users. In this scenario there was a receptionist and guard who could offer guidance to the team. The software was called GroupSystems Online and now the company GroupSystems offers a ThinkTank digital engagement platform (https://www.thinktank.net/).

Another issue with GVTs is Team Identity or TI. Technology can help with strengthening this connection through features such as chats which enable team members located in different time zones to interact [20]. Karl [11] concluded employees should be trained in the use of features such as chat and other features that relate back to Team Identity. von Thulen [20] also suggests the team leader or facilitator act as a role model for the rest of the members because fostering active participation increases team interaction.

Another helpful measure found in the literature was provided in the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) best practices for virtual meeting facilitation [15]. Thirteen lessons were identified along with best practices for each.

In 2021, the way meetings should be facilitated was studied resulting in the good, the bad and the ugly of virtual meetings. Zoom fatigue and lack of knowledge regarding social norms for virtual meetings were a couple of the findings of this study [11]. For virtual team members to collaborate successfully, there needs to be a shared understanding which provides a critical foundation for collaboration [19]. Since meeting facilitators provide levels of socioemotional support to its teams [14] using group system support may help improve the processes of online facilitation.

CONCLUSION

It has been known for decades that group facilitation skills are critical for meeting interactions [2]. Due to the minimal number of facilitators studied regarding the way video conferencing capabilities were used to create the desired team mental model, this review suggests research around this topic using MS Teams. There is the need to add other components to the study such as GSS characteristics, more specifically MS Teams. These characteristics may affect the outcome being researched. Since the relationship between Team Mental Model and Project Success has been established [4], it is considered out of scope. With the research around the pitfalls of GVTs [7], and the impending need for more of them in the future [3], studying teams with successful and unsuccessful projects using MS Teams may shed light on process and procedures that could become the standard for project success.

REFERENCES


