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THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a laboratory experiment involving virtual teams organizing via a chat room to complete an information-sharing task. We focus specifically on determining antecedents of trust in virtual teams as called for by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999). Our analysis is based on the group development model developed by Wheelan (1990). The teams completed the task ten times and were allowed to reorganize in the chat room if necessary before completing the task again. Data were collected via questionnaire about individual perceptions of sense of belonging, task faithfulness, and trust in peers four times during the experiment.

The results show that early in the course of the experiment, trust in peers was determined by task faithfulness and sense of belonging. Over time, sense of belonging remained an important predictor of trust in peers while task faithfulness became less important. Therefore, swift trust (Meyerson et. al. 1996) depends on perceptions of whether the task is being accomplished in an appropriate way. As the group develops, trust begins to stand on its own, but continues to rely on feelings of belonging. Therefore, trust in virtual teams appears to rest on two pillars: 1) swift trust, which carries the group through its early work and ensures that at least some work gets done, and 2) developmental trust, which is based on the interaction of group members and ensures that the group can continue to work together. When leaders of virtual teams wish to quickly induce feelings of trust, they should ensure that all team members feel a sense of belonging and each team member performs their work in a manner that the other members feel is appropriate. As virtual teams continue to work together, team members learn whether they can rely on each other and can be allowed to restructure the team.

Keywords: Virtual teams, virtual team development, group development