Virtual Teams: Creating Synergies through Organizational Partnerships

Panel Members:

Robert Davison

Dept of Information Systems, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (Chair)

Craig Parker

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Faculty of Technology, Policy & Management, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

Gerd Paul

SOFI, Göttingen, Germany

Background and Panel Outline

21st century organisational contexts increasingly involve interaction between teams of people who are not co-located [cf. 1]. These teams may be distributed within a single country, or, especially in the case of smaller countries, distributed across two or more countries. Associated with this distribution is the issue of culture, since culture varies not only between organisations, but also between countries at the societal level [cf. 2]. For a variety of reasons, it is not always expeditious for individual members of teams to travel to remote locations in order to participate in meetings or to work on remote projects. These reasons relate, in part, to the inaccessibility of critical, informational resources, financial and emotional costs of travel, the inconvenience of not being at home or in the office, and the time lost through travelling and recovering from travelling.

In parallel with organisational developments and applications of Virtual Teams, the use of such teams in the Educational context has been emerging in the last 2-3 years. These teams may involve students in traditional face-to-face classes, or students registered for online programmes. By providing students with the opportunity to engage in virtual team work on realistic (if not real) projects, we believe that they will be much better prepared for the virtual workspace that will present itself in organisational worklife. However, while cross-cultural virtual teams of students can achieve much (our prior experiences are in the main very positive), still more can be achieved by engaging student teams with organisational work contexts.

In this panel session, we wish to consider how both students and organisations can reap benefits through participation in a virtual partnership. Our speakers will present their experiences of virtual team interaction, identifying both facilitating factors and obstacles to effective virtual team progress.

[1]   Townsend, A.M., DeMarie, S.M. and Hendrickson, A.R. (1998) Virtual Teams: Technology and the Workplace of the Future, *Academy of Management Executive*, **12**, 3, 17-29.

[2]   Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values*, Sage Publications: London.

Issues for Discussion and Roles of the Panellists

- Robert Davison provided a brief introduction to the topic and its importance, the panellists and a description of the panel's objectives.

- Mirjam Huis in 't Veld discussed experiences obtained through a study of Virtual Teams in Shell.

- Craig Parker provided an overview of eCommerce education needs of SMEs and propose possible uses of virtual teams and business simulations for addressing these needs.

- Gerd Paul presented findings of an ongoing study on tele-co-operation in small German high-tech firms identifying structural and cultural obstacles for a rapid expansion of virtual teams.

Objectives and Ideas for Action

The prime objective of this panel is to stimulate awareness of the opportunities that virtual teams can both enable and subsequently take advantage of. Virtual teams research is often restricted to student-student interactions. While this can yield valuable insights, there are yet more valuable opportunities and challenges available that involve student-industry or industry-industry collaboration and virtual work. Through discussion of the panelists' virtual team experiences, and specifically through the identification of the facilitating conditions and obstacles they encountered, we hope to engage the audience in a discussion of virtual team opportunities. Indeed, we expect that the audience members will have their own experiences to narrate. Ideally, we would like to stimulate the initiation of virtual team projects between academia and industry. For this reason, it is important that our audience includes people from both academic and organisational environments. The panel chair is currently the editor of an ISWORLD website dedicated to virtual teams: (http://www.is.cityu.edu.hk/research/resources/vt/vt.htm).

Profiles of the Panelists

Robert Davison is editor-in-chief of the Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries and an associate editor of the Information Systems Journal. His recent work has been published in Communications of the ACM, Information Systems Journal, Information & Management and Information Technology & People. His has recently completed co-editing a special section of the Communications of the ACM on Global Applications of Collaborative Technology, and is currently co-editing a special issue of the IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management on Cultural Issues and IT Management. His current work involves an exploration of virtual teams in educational contexts, as well as an ongoing interest in applying Action Research in organisational problem solving. Home page: http://www.is.cityu.edu.hk/people/academicstaff/rd/rd.htm

Mirjam Huis in 't Veld is a research assistant at the Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management at the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. She received her MSc in Cognitive Science from the Catholic University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. After joining the Department of Psychology of Work and Organisation she started research on the development of evaluation methods to assess ICT applications developed for the support of knowledge sharing processes within distributed groups in organisational contexts. The objective of the research is to help distributed groups and communities to develop a suitable, efficient way of using ICT. The evaluation methods can also give more insight into what specific

design and implementation principles are needed to make telematic applications effective and successful.

Craig Parker has spent the last eight years researching business simulation approaches to teaching university students about eCommerce, which has included inter-university eCommerce business simulations. This work led to the development of a Web-based business simulation called TRECS (Teaching Realistic Electronic Commerce Solutions). His recent work has been published in Information Technology & Management and Simulation & Gaming. He has also co-authored the Wiley & Sons book Technology of Internet Business. Home page: http://www.deakin.edu.au/mis/pages/staff/cparker.htm

Gerd Paul has a degree in sociology and published his Ph.D. thesis on "engineers and their work" in 1989 (Campus). He worked on the social shaping of technology in various technological fields. In 1999 he published (with W. Konrad) a book on "innovation in the software industry" (Campus), which studied innovation in the ERP and the process automation sector. He was member (and partly co-ordinator) of the network "social research on technology", financed by the German Ministry of Technology. In 1999 he was a visiting professor at the University of Almeria (Spain), where he investigated problems of technology transfer. He is evaluator of technical projects of the 4th and 5th framework program of the European Union. His current work studies virtual enterprises in the multimedia, software and internet industry.