Social Presence in Virtual Teams

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify processes that construct the sense of social presence in virtual teams. A review of extant literature on virtual teams uncovers identification, structural interdependence, and leadership as three key processes in constructing and maintaining social presence. Research suggests that technologies function as an enabling, instead of determining, factor.

*Keywords---***social presence, virtual teams***.*

The accelerated growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the past two decades has enabled organizations to adopt geographically distributed work teams, known as virtual teams [1]. The fundamental difference between virtual and traditional teams lies in their modes of social presence [2]. Electronic proximity, specifically, corporeal telepresence [2] in virtual teams replaces physical proximity that characterizes traditional work teams. The sense of social presence [2], we argue, is an important dimension of team cohesion, which has been shown to have strong reciprocal relationship with team performance [3]. Our research question in this paper is, *What are the processes that construct and maintain the sense of social presence in virtual teams*? We approach this question by reviewing extant literature on virtual teams. Using several electronic databases, we identified more than forty articles on virtual teams published in twenty-nine peer reviewed scholarly journals across six disciplines from 1998 to 2006.

Our review identified three processes that are instrumental in constructing and maintaining the sense of social presence: identification, structural interdependence, and leadership. First, team identification is both a psychological and communicative process that helps create the sense of togetherness. A common team identity is a resource sustained through communication and unites team members through psychological attachment [4]. Second, structural interdependence is required at both organizational and team levels. For instance, at the team level, interdependence could be achieved through high quality of goal setting process and high task interdependence [5]. At the organizational level, reward and recognition systems should promote outcome interdependence. An interdependent structural design creates opportunities for interaction and establishes the salience of other team members. Finally, leadership has a prominent role in helping achieve the structural and psychological connectedness through communicative actions, such as role specification, feedback, and motivation. Research has noted the high communication demand on leaders of virtual teams [6, 7].

These three processes are not mutually exclusive. They interact and reinforce each other in creating the sense of social presence. For example, both identification and structural interdependence are contingent on the quality of leadership process in a team. Structural interdependence is conducive to creating a common identity.

Additionally, a common theme across the studies we reviewed is that technology is an enabler in building the sense of social presence but not the solution. Technological choices should be determined by task characteristics, relationship needs, and social contexts [8]. Attention to social contexts is especially important considering the diverse cultural backgrounds that virtual team members tend to have. Therefore, it is not the bandwidth of an ICT but the fit among task, relationship, context, and technology that helps bring out the sense of social presence in virtual teams.

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