The Social Factors of Virtual Organizations:
Fostering Relationships, Promoting Motivation, and Establishing a Lead Coordinator

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COM499, Fall 2015 – Chapman University; Orange, CA

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Introduction

As the big data movement is gaining momentum, it is critical that we understand the social dynamics of virtual organizations that lead them to success. The three social factors that will be examined in this poster are the importance of building relationships, instilling motivation, and establishing a lead coordinator within virtual organizations. Investigating these factors is necessary in order to better understand how virtual organizations function and in order to improve the quality of the work environment for employees.

Theoretical Perspective

Relationships are built on social capital and are the foundation of virtual organizations. Social capital is constructed by "human elements, such as learning, trust and innovation, that are created and enhanced during interpersonal interactions" (McGarth & Sparks, 2005, p. 46). Research has shown that relationships are absolutely necessary in order for traditional organizations to thrive and ultimately lead to successful working environments and teams (McGarth & Sparks, 2005).

Literature has demonstrated that motivation is crucial for employee morale and a positive work environment within the traditional context. It has been historically cited that the best management practices are built on instilling motivation within employees; the primary focus of management should be on the needs and the motivation of their employees (Bedeian, 1993).

Establishing a lead coordinator is not only essential for ensuring a productive workflow, but also affects a strong development of relationships and motivations among employees. Lead coordinators should provide guidance and direction for the employees while communicating organizational goals and motivating them to increase dedication to the project (Drouillard & Kleiner, 1996).

The literature above suggests that the three factors of building relationships, instilling motivation, and establishing a lead coordinator are critical in traditional organizations. This posters examines if these factors also hold true in virtual organizations. We ask the research question, *"Do virtual organizations uphold the same social factors that have been found to be essential in traditional organizations?"*

Methodology

This poster employed the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), analyzing 133 interviews conducted with domain scientists (e.g., informatics researchers, computational chemists, theoretical physicists) and computational technologists. Thirty-five of these interviews were member check interviews conducted in the final phase of the investigation. Participants were from across the US (including CA, IL, IN, SC, MI, TX, etc.) and a small portion was from the UK (Scotland). Interviews were conducted either in person or by telephone. Following the grounded theory coding techniques, we performed multiple iterations of data analysis and literature integration, yielding preliminary findings presented in this poster.

The Importance of Building Relationships

Building relationships is essential for creating a strong foundation in virtual organizations. Strong relationships establish a rapport with team members, which facilitates efficient collaborations and synergistic working relationships built on mutual trust and respect.

- "A great example is the development of Linux. You have people of all abilities contributing to it. Not everyone has the right level of expertise, but it's a successful project because there's a mediation and a moderation process [where] the less novice people actually pass on their patches or contributions to more senior people who read them, test them, and move them onward. Or there could be a mentor – a mentor relationship with people with less skills to bring them up to speed or guide them to develop small features and assemble." (Adopter, CA, 7/17/14)
- "I literally sat my student on there…and I let them walk me through what they were doing. And there's been a couple times where I've literally had to say, 'Look, I trust this employee just as much as I trust any other full-time guy, so you're going to have to get over it and let him work on your machine.' And I think doing that kind of thing helps boost your employees' morale and willingness to work with other faculty members. They have to know you've got their back kind of thing." (Administrator, GA, 7/29/15)
- "Well, we will get together for that kick-off meeting. We'll do that in person because there's no substitute for getting to know somebody, seeing the body language, being able to work on a white board. There just really isn't any substitute for that. But after that, electronic collaboration tools these days are phenomenal and you're dealing with experts. Typically, they're scattered around the globe. You know, you take them where you find them." (Administrator, WA, 7/28/15)

The Importance of Instilling Motivation

Motivation among employees is necessary for an optimal work environment and employee performance. Motivation and buy-in increase team morale and project dedication, which ultimately leads to an improved workflow.

- "A lot of times we'll go into a project and it'll be boring at first, and we kind of find a shared goal and we work toward it. The other times it's purely mechanical and I have to get it out for this guy to do his research, and I really could care less. But when it's really good is when you can match up, 'Oh this is something I'm passionate about,' and something they're passionate about. Let's build this system and get it going!" (Administrator, GA, 7/29/15)
- "You know, we've actually embarked under it as pilot studies with different organizations and one of the things we find is that if there isn't a buy-in from the organization, things typically don't go anywhere – there was one bank that we worked with and I believe at the executive levels, there was a lot of passion for the job that we were trying to do, but there wasn't at the working ranks. And because we didn't make them pay anything for the pilot, there just wasn't a buy-in, so if you're trying to create an organization, the most critical thing is that there has to be a buy-in. There has to be a well-recognized value to each of the participants in the product." (Administrator, WA, 7/28/15)

The Importance of Establishing a Lead Coordinator

A an organization without a leader is like an army without a general. Lead coordinators give the direction and strategize guidance for the organization and its project teams. Lead coordinators are the catalyst to building and maintaining the social dynamics of e-science projects.

- "I would say [successful VOs] find the right balance between a strong leadership and anarchy. So both extremes I would say would be bad. So if you have just a single person--who is driving the virtual organization, I don't think that is good. So then if you also have kind of nobody in charge either, that's not so good either. So I would say, somewhere in the middle where there are some obvious leaders of the project… I think that, that is ideal and they have the good sense to – would I put it – to not rule too strictly. You know, maybe have control over the code base, be selective about who they allow to make changes without kind of opening things up too widely, but allowing enough liability…And they just kind of have the right feel for things. They know what makes people tick. They can lead without being oppressive. They give people the opportunity to make their contribution and have their contribution be taken seriously." (Administrator, CA, 11/13/14)
- "I think sometimes actually the leadership matters a lot. The leadership can set the right tone and I've seen – and actually this is true for any organization, you can look at any group, even the smallest group within [University A] or [University B], a lot of times who's at the top influences how the rest of the organization looks like." (Administrator, CA, 11/21/13)

Conclusion

There are a multitude of factors that can contribute to a successful social dynamic in a virtual organization. These three factors examined in this poster are interrelated and parallel with previous research that has examined traditional organizations. Relationship building is critical to the formation and success of the team, as relationships keep members invested in projects and dedicated to the work they are doing. Relationships are also a means to instill motivation in team members; without motivation, there is a lack of passion that drives them to work on projects. In order to have a successful outcome, there needs to be a buy-in from all members. Ultimately, a lead coordinator is needed to facilitate these social dynamics in a project by offering the group drive, guidance, and purpose. It appears that virtual organizations do in fact uphold the same social factors that have been found to be essential in traditional organizations. This poster discusses three key aspects of a healthy social dynamic in a virtual organizations, offering practitioners a preview of the necessary components in building a productive and positive work environment.

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