



Don't forget...

Culture matters:

A barrier analysis of 30 cultural factors affecting distributed workplaces

by Dr. George F. Simons



Managing differences in Virtual Teamwork requires the knowledge and skills required to realize the value-added of new ways of working. Organizations and teams that have not paid attention to cultural factors repeatedly report that they have fallen into the equation:

Old organizational culture

+ New technology

Expensive old organization

On these pages, we have assembled thirty of the cultural barriers that organizations and virtual teams around the world have faced, and some of the solutions or directions that address those challenges.

"No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it." Albert Einstein

Cultural barrier

Barrier analysis suggests...

A. Barriers resulting from the nature of culture itself and virtual working

- 1. Culture is pervasive and even more transparent in VGT work than face-to-face collaboration.** It is ignored as a key factor for success. In cultural matters, don't know what we don't know. An Arab proverb says, "We don't know who discovered water, but we are sure that it wasn't a fish."
 - *Learning to learn about culture as part of the training for distributed working*
 - *Looking for cultural factors in unexpected disconnects*
 - *Finding cultural informants from the other culture.*
- 2. Virtual media send an unseen cultural message.** Their very structure bears the cultural values and priorities of their creators and therefore may seem like cultural interference when transported abroad. "The medium is the message." (McLuhan)
 - *Discuss the new tools with the new users. What implications exist for them that may be important and different.*
 - *Don't assume that there must be only one culture of virtual working. Many aspects of virtual working can benefit from diverse cultural ideas and habits.*

Cultural barrier

Barrier analysis suggests...

B. Barriers to virtual working resulting largely from organizational culture.

3. **Assumptions about where and how work is done.** A recent telecom ad in the Dutch newspaper *Volkscraant* said, "Voor een topgesprek hoeft u de deur niet uit." (You don't have to leave the house for a top-level meeting.)

Reassessing assumptions about the nature, necessity and location of the kinds of meetings that take place. Face-to-face meetings are for the interpersonal, vision and high level planning, team building needs of the organization, while much reporting and exchange of information, etc., occurs via the new technology
4. **Assumptions about when work is done.** Distributed working radically challenges the common assumptions about what days are workdays and how long a workday is. E.g., suspicions arise that those who work remotely or at home are wasting time.
 - *Results, rather than time-oriented management. Outputs become primary, not inputs or through-puts*
 - *Discussion of the issues, trust building*
 - *In many cases global virtual teamwork creates a 24 hour workday*
 - *Examine health, security, social and environmental implications of virtual work, not just use of technology, but its impact on lifestyle*
5. **Information is guarded,** used as power, or, conversely, is too widely distributed. Teamwork, corporate intelligence or security suffers. There is frustration and little value added from virtualizing business operations.
 - *Work out sharing agreements and boundaries.*
 - *Reward sharing both psychologically (Make, "You are not an expert unless you share" into a cultural value) and reinforce it by the compensation system.*
6. **After extensive investment people fail to use the new technology.** New ways of working are not understood or valued by the existing structure and culture.
 - *Do force-field analysis of cultural and other factors that support and undermine virtual working*
 - *Address the key success factors*
7. **Lack of diversity.** Teams suffer from myopia, lack of imagination, follow-through or organizational fit. Doesn't have the resources to understand, communicate well with customers
 - *Recruit for diversity in background, skills, and personality types.*
 - *Educate team in cultural competencies*
8. **Teamwork is not understood, supported or valued.** People are described as teams but operate as individuals

Walking the talk on teamwork, i.e., supporting, rewarding teamwork in policies and procedures, management behavior, etc.

Cultural barrier

- 9. Mismatch of organizational cultures.** Expanded teams may contain members from vendors, consultants, and suppliers. There may be a mismatch about who is part of the team and privy to its workings, about how work is to take place, what security standards and measures are appropriate, etc.

Barrier analysis suggests...

- *Careful team selection, formation and negotiation of issues*
- *Build a team culture that supports the vision and charter of the team*

C. Barriers to VGT work resulting from the diverse national or ethnic cultures.

- 10. Virtual working is seen as an external imposition** Especially where a national group may see themselves historically as having been treated unfairly, or as somehow dominated by a parent firm, it may resist or be suspicious of new initiatives, particularly those like distributed working that have strong cultural implications.

- *Culturally sensitive introduction of new ways of working.*
- *Carefully created business case with full participation of all parties involved*

- 11. Mismatch of high/low cultural context.** In individualistic cultures (Northern Europe, North America) commonly the MESSAGE is all there is, or needs to be, to respond or take action. A one line e-mail request may be sent, but to act or respond, a person from a more collective culture (in varying degrees - Southern, Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America) needs to know:

- Who (status, role) is the sender?
- Why was this message written?
- Who else in my organization knows about this or needs to know about it?
- What consensus or permission do I need from others in order to respond?

- *Training underscores importance and nature of differing contexts on both sides.*
- *Face-to-face time to get teams started and to maintain them*
- *Building common context for teamwork by providing personal information, pictures, accomplishments, titles, etc., roles in the system*
- *Online time for introductions, warm-ups, chit-chat about things especially people you know in common*
- *Social events, personal forums online.*
- *Providing enough information to help the other to understand your context*

- 12. Difference in action orientation.** Individualistic cultures stress what you can do and what you know. Despite similar technical capabilities, more collective cultures often stress who you are and whom you know. In one case, facts, data, deadlines get things done; in the other, relationships, contacts, roles get things done

Coach and learn from each other to get value-added from both approaches

Cultural barrier

13. Inappropriate, unprepared, incorrect, blunt responses cause loss of face for:

- the sender
- the sender's superior & subordinates
- the recipient (in the sender's culture)

14. Time is money. In collective person oriented cultures, relationship is money (and much more). This often results in mismatch of expectations around use of time, response time, meeting deadlines, etc.

15. Polychronic (human multitasking) vs. monochromic (one thing at a time) sense of time and activity. Each culture sees the other as respectively narrow-minded or distracted. Commitment of polychronic individuals to virtual tasks may differ because they have multiple responsibilities

16. Resistance to the use of certain media. E.g., where face is important, concern about spelling in forums, e-mail, and concern about giving unprepared, quick, imperfect answers.

17. Miscommunication, power imbalance between first and second language speakers, writers, e.g., native English speakers and ESL speakers. Second language speakers become an out-group.

Barrier analysis suggests...

Use corporate resources on intercultural communication to prepare not only expatriates but also those who are virtual expatriates

- *Learn from each other to get value-added from both approaches*
- *Identify the term perspective of your partners, are they long, medium, short term thinkers and planners*
- *Get the full picture of how the other culture works.*
- *Negotiate within the realm of the possible*
- *Plan in sufficient lead time where needed*
- *Encourage use of spelling and grammar, dictionaries, thesaurus, templates, wizards and autosummary (review before sending) software features.*
- *Attach contextual documents, graphics.*
- *Assign an editor to assist in publication of contributions to forums, websites, etc.*
- *Prefer forums, where reflection before answering is encouraged, to e-mail or chat rooms*
- *Use broad, easy access, format, e.g., HTML*
- *Examine proprietary media for cultural bias.*
- *Teach native speakers/writers the dynamics of second language mastery.*
- *Avoid slang, jargon, unfamiliar acronyms*
- *Write simply, using (E)SL, not (E)FL, short sentences*
- *Inquire about appropriate forms of address & levels of directness*

Cultural barrier

18. Differences in how conflict is managed.

In some cultures surfacing conflict publicly is deemed immature while others see a good argument as bringing the best out of people.

19. Differing understandings of the nature of authority.

Authority may be derived from:

- Role, status, position in the hierarchy
- Control of critical resources & contacts
- Knowledge & competence
- Initiative taking & group acknowledgement

In some cultures The person in authority may be responsible but not be the person with the technical knowledge consensus

20. The culture of networking may contradict strong local values.

E.g., virtual teams tend to work around hierarchy and structures and to undermine the positional/role power

21. Differences in the understanding of what is a team, who belongs to it and how it functions.

Disjointed working processes misunderstandings and failed expectations. Loss of trust.

Barrier analysis suggests...

- *Prefer asynchronous communication, (conferencing, e-mail) for working out the details - it gives the parties time to confer before responding*
- *Use teleconferencing to affirm the relationship, private phone calls for off-line resolution*
- *Expect reluctance to take part directly*
- *Encourage nomination of a professional subordinate who even then may participate indirectly*
- *Acknowledge both the superior and subordinate for value added.*

Learn to work with existing structures at the same time finding the keys that work successfully in each culture.

Get a functional understanding about how teams may differ, e.g., In more collective cultures

- *Teams are easy to form among like nationals*
- *Individuals assigned a task may form a team to do it*
- *The team may be further reaching in its membership than you expect*
- *Decisions are collaborative & the spokesperson can't privately modify them. Don't put them on the spot*
- *New information & changes late in the process stalls the mechanism*

Cultural barrier

Continuation of 21.

22. In virtual environments status may not be apparent. Good manners and protocol may be disastrously violated.

23. Different preferences in the use of virtual media. E.g., more collective cultures often favor personal face-to-face meeting, videoconferencing and telephone conversations over computer forums, and e-mail.

Barrier analysis suggests...

In more individualistic cultures

- *Teams allow individuals to “star”*
- *Individuals take decisions on their own & (may) inform others only on a need-to-know basis*
- *The best teams are rarely larger than 6 or 8 people*
- *Individuals are expected to take charge, often resent micromanaging or being micromanaged*
- *Last minute changes in direction may occur if seen as strategic*
- *Be sensitive to reluctance to take part in peer-to-peer discussions*
- *Maintain proper forms of address & acknowledge their contributions regularly*
- *Discuss and negotiate preferences.*
- *Accommodate your partners by using multiple channels of communication*

D. Barriers to VGT work resulting from gender differences.

24. Technology is "a guy thing." Women at best find support roles. Difficulty in collaborating with groups, customers, etc. that have stronger female presence.

Examine recruitment, promotion policies.

25. Gender differences in use of communication styles. Misunderstandings of the nature of commitments, acknowledgements, use or abuse of humor

- *Examine and discuss communication styles.*
- *Learn the advantages of different communication styles for reaching diverse team members.*

Cultural barrier

Barrier analysis suggests...

E. Barriers to VGT work resulting from cultural learning disabilities

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| 26. Culture is “old fashioned” stuff that will disappear as soon as we get down to work together. | <i>Not in your lifetime. Certainly not during your tenure on a virtual team.</i> |
| 27. Cultural differences are just superficial. Underneath we are all the same. | <i>You've got to deal with the topology to get to the common reservoir.</i> |
| 28. "They" will see that our way is better. | <i>"They" think the same thing.</i> |
| 29. I used to work there. | <i>When? Hopefully you did it well, but you never did it virtually.</i> |
| 30. Build the technology and they will come. | <i>Who? When? How? At what cost?</i> |

Virtual working requires both: “Rethinking the way we work. Reworking the way we think.”
Mike Davis, media designer

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