An Embedded Model of Cultural Adaptation in Global Teams

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This research examines the process through which globally distributed work teams attempt to adapt to cross-cultural differences while being constrained by the local contexts in which they are embedded. We conducted an in-depth field study of nine software development teams that included 132 ethnographic initial interviews, periods of team observation, 19 follow-up interviews, and team meetings. Inductive analysis of the data led us to develop an embedded model of cultural adaptation in global teams to describe the process we observed as teams attempted to cope with important differences in interpersonal communication styles, preferred approaches to organizational control and authority relations, and work-related knowledge and problem-solving approaches. We show how local embeddedness and interdependence across sites together drive cultural adaptation dialectics as actors attempt to resolve rippling tensions within and across nested social structures. The model of cultural adaptation that we developed as an outcome of our research challenges literature that assumes adaptation can be contained within a team and is distinctive in incorporating a dynamic systems view of culture. We build on and develop theory concerning multilevel structuration dynamics. Our work may have implications for other types of boundary-spanning collaborations such as strategic alliances and multinational corporations.

Key words: intercultural adaptation; global teams; virtual teams; distributed teams; structuration; dialectic change; embeddedness; dynamic systems; qualitative methods; cultural differences

Introduction

When globally distributed team members push back their desk chairs from email and WebEx, what envelops them are the people, habits, objects, and rhythms of their locality: their parents, children and friends; their local colleagues; the transportation system; the education system; the local job market. Do these worlds matter in the functioning of a globally distributed team? In this study, we took an inductive approach to that question, and the answer turns out to be yes, those worlds do matter.

Yet these worlds have received relatively little attention in theory development and in empirical research to date concerning global teams. The team typically is in focus, but the local contexts in which team members are embedded recede. Our research questions were “What challenges do global team members describe as ‘cultural’ in their team?” and “what adaptation, if any, occurs concerning these challenges?” We studied nine globally distributed software development teams longitudinally, including 151 ethnographic interviews, team meetings, and field observations at multiple points over a 21-month time period. We discovered that when team members talked about what they thought of as important national cultural differences, they laced these accounts with references to local conditions and factors that made the focal cultural differences resistant to adaptation. Moreover, we traced an effortful, zigzagging, time-consuming process by which the teams endeavored to adapt to the focal differences.

Our inductive research led us to develop a contextually embedded model of cultural adaptation in global teams. It builds on and further develops theory concerning multilevel structuration dynamics. We show how local embeddedness and interdependence across sites together drive cultural adaptation dialectics as actors attempt to resolve rippling tensions within and across nested social structures. The embedded model of cultural adaptation that we developed as an outcome of our research challenges literature that assumes cultural adaptation can be contained within a team (e.g., Adair et al. 2006, Earley and Mosakowski 2000). Our model also is distinctive in that it incorporates a dynamic systems view of culture in which cultures and selves mutually constitute each other (e.g., Kitayama 2002, Markus and Kitayama 2010). This contrasts with a static entity view of culture that focuses on the cultural values and ways of thinking that are learned and used by individuals (e.g., Earley and Randel 1997, Hofstede and Hofstede 2005).

Cultural Adaptation in Global Teams

There have been two major reviews in recent years of the literature concerning globally distributed teams