

Global Virtual Teams: Best Practices for Management Education

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Abstract

As the workplace becomes increasingly globalized, it is essential that business leaders have the ability to work with individuals from a variety of different cultures as well as the capacity to understand and communicate with people having vastly different backgrounds (Duus & Cooray, 2014; Javidan, 2013; Stahl & Brannen, 2013). It is therefore crucial that students have the opportunity to develop the skills which will enable them to function effectively in a workplace where cross-cultural competency is required (Erez, et al, 2013; Mendenhall, et al. 2013; Taras, et al., 2013). One way to assist students in the development of this competency is through the use of global virtual teams (GVTs) in the classroom. This paper briefly examines the benefits and challenges of GVTs as a backdrop to the development of best practices for faculty and students who are considering undertaking a GVT. For over 20 years, the authors have incorporated GVTs into the classroom while using a variety of formats and assessing the effectiveness of these teams based on both qualitative and quantitative data in an effort to develop a set of best practice guidelines for assisting faculty in helping their students be better prepared for GVTs.

A great deal has been written about GVTs since the advent of the Internet, and particularly in the last two decades with the development of conferencing technology. Most of the research examines the challenges inherent in GVTs, often focusing on trust, conflict, culture and communication issues and leadership (Brandl & Neyer, 2009; Daim, et al, 2012; Dekker et al., 2008; Ferreira, Pinheiro de Lima & Gouvea da Costa, 2012; Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013; Stahl, et al, 2010). With limited exceptions (Erez, et al., 2013; Taras, et al., 2013), these studies investigate GVTs in the workplace rather than in the classroom. Although that is relevant for our students in the long run, few studies address GVT best practices for the classroom that can prepare our students for the GVT situations they will face in the workplace.

Summary of Qualitative and Quantitative Data Findings

The authors began using GVTs in 1996 as a tool to aid students in the development of their cross-cultural communication skills, using email as the primary form of communication prior to meeting using satellite transmission. The advent of readily available and inexpensive conferencing technology in the last decade has enabled the authors to develop multicultural, multi-country teams where students complete an assignment in time frames varying from two to ten weeks. With each successive GVT, the authors collected both qualitative and quantitative

data (i.e., in-depth focus groups, open ended questions, and pre- and post-exercise surveys) examining team successes, levels of trust, conflict, cross-cultural competency, communication issues, time management problems and other challenges faced during the exercises. Analysis of these data from over fifteen sets of GVT exercises with over 250 teams have enabled us to develop a list of “best practices” to assist faculty who may be considering the use of a GVT in their classroom, but who don’t know how to start or want to avoid the pitfalls inherent when introducing a new experiential exercise into the classroom. This paper focuses only on assisting students and faculty once a GVT exercise has been developed. (For those individuals seeking to learn how to develop a GVT exercise with global colleagues, refer to Luethge, et al., 2016). Below are some of the best practices, which will be detailed in full for the conference paper.

Best Practices - Before the exercise

- Consider giving students as much information as possible. Let them know that they will have issues with time management, time zone differences, communication, and differences in availability. Encourage flexibility. If there are problems, first assume that you have misunderstood rather than attributing differences to being inept or lazy. Problems should be expected.
- Consider assigning preliminary readings with a quiz to ensure reading occurs. The authors suggest the challenges of GVTs, best practices of GVTs, cross-cultural issues, and group/team issues (e.g., forming, storming, norming, and performing).
- Consider explaining to students the differences between asynchronous (time-lag) and synchronous (real-time) communication technologies. The authors suggest letting the students choose which technologies to use, but also requiring documentation of videoconferences while giving students specifics on how to do this. Communication via document sharing, multiple types of social media and screencasts are options.

Best Practices - During the exercise

- Consider using an ice breaker as a way to build trust. One option is to have students name the team and develop a logo to increase commitment, cooperation, and build excitement.
- Consider a quick problem-solving project to complete virtually. You can require consensus rather than voting, which is good practice. Having an easy win up front is vital.
- Consider using a midterm course check (Even jets have course corrections. You don’t just point a jet in the right direction and assume it will get to the designated location without any course corrections to account for wind, storms, other air traffic, etc.). Allow students to note what is going well, what is frustrating them, what are their major/minor issues, and what needs to be addressed.
- Consider using both group and individual reflection papers to increase learning and retention of material. Encourage students to write down successes and challenges from each meeting in a journal so they have information for their reflections, and make the journal part of the grade.

Best Practices - After the exercise

- Group reflection papers should focus on what was learned rather than on personal attacks directed towards one’s teammates.
- Individual reflections will give students an opportunity to look at what they learned above and beyond the group level.
- Debriefing by teaching instructors on what worked well and what required development.

A much more complete literature review examining benefits, challenges and efficacy of GVT skills and technological development appears in the complete manuscript.

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