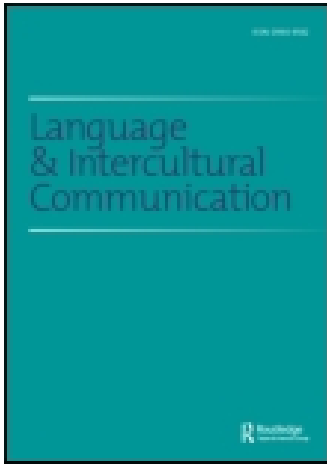


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### Virtual team management: what is causing communication breakdown?

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## Virtual team management: what is causing communication breakdown?

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The combined effects of business offshoring, of flexible work practices and of rapid improvements in technology have resulted in workplace virtual communication becoming increasingly prevalent for business meetings. However, business leaders report them to be more challenging than face-to-face ones. Most global teams are located where diverse offshored work teams are using English as a lingua franca, and despite common business complaints that they are fraught with communication breakdown, the precise causes appear to be highly complex. This paper reports on a training needs analysis carried out in a large globalized workplace for a programme entitled ‘Communicating in Virtual Teams’. Multiple sources such as surveys, interviews, document reviews and meeting observations were used to better understand the causes of virtual team communication breakdown. Whilst the analyses revealed different kinds of language and cultural misunderstandings, deeper problems of marginalization and identity confusion within global teams were also reported. This paper argues that without addressing the underlying struggles caused by offshoring, a training programme runs the risk of only addressing the surface communication problems of technology, leadership and meeting skills and even language and culture issues, which can arguably be seen as ‘masking’ deeper employee concerns and struggles.

在商业离岸外包, 灵活的工作方式, 以及快速发展的科技的共同作用下, 用于商务会议的工作场合虚拟交流越来越流行。然而, 商业领袖们称虚拟交流比面对面交流更富挑战性。频频的商业投诉显示虚拟交流充满了交流障碍, 即便如此, 绝大多数多元化的离岸工作团队仍然位于将英语作为通用语的地区。这其中的确切原因十分复杂。本论文报告了在一间大型全球化的工作场所中进行的培训需求分析的结果。该培训需求分析是为一个名为‘虚拟团队中的交流’的项目而作的。为更好地了解引发虚拟团队中交流障碍的原因, 本研究使用了多个资料来源, 如问卷, 访谈, 文件检阅, 和会议观察。数据分析结果显示出各种语言 and 文化的误解, 同时, 也报告了全球性团队中的深层问题——边缘化和身份困惑。本文认为培训项目如不解决离岸外包导致的潜在挣扎这个问题, 将有可能只解决了一些趋于表面的交流问题, 包括技术, 领导和会议技巧, 乃至语言和文化的议题。可以认为这样的做法是‘掩盖’了深层次的员工的忧虑和挣扎。

**Keywords:** virtual team meetings; business communication; intercultural and language breakdown

### Introduction

In the last decade increasing amounts of work are being sent offshore to developing countries, such as India, the Philippines, Costa Rica and Vietnam. It is estimated that by

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2020, the market for this Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) industry will triple in size from USD 500 billion to USD 1.5–1.6 trillion (NASSCOM, 2009). A well-known English speaking multinational company reported in 2013 that 45% of its international employees are now scattered around Asia, and a large-scale study across global multinational companies recently reported that 80% of its respondents were part of teams with members based in different locations (RW CultureWizard, 2010). This has resulted in fundamental shifts in the way people work globally and has meant rapid organizational change. In 2010, a multinational financial company called MetroFin, a pseudonym for the purposes of this study, initiated a call for a one-day ‘Communicating in Virtual Teams’ training course provider. The course would address the communication needs of on- and offshore frontline managers of virtual teams. The aim of the training needs analysis (TNA) was to understand how managers and teams communicate and work in virtual teams, both on- and offshore, and identify key gaps and difficulties to be addressed by a well-targeted training course. The company that won this training project was a BPO communications consultancy group which I founded when I lived and worked in Manila 10 years ago. As a full-time academic now, I was permitted by the company and the client to shadow and participate in the TNA, and use the data for research and publication purposes. The identity of the company would obviously need to remain confidential.

Understanding the problems for training, through a TNA, is a key educational step in the development of a successful course (see for example, Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011). As with an ethnographic study, many voices in this process need to be elicited and heard, and this requires investigating the problem via multiple sources for triangulation purposes. MetroFin is used as a case study to explore how challenges in virtual team communication are evidenced and understood in its workplace. This particular workplace aims to be a significant player in the financial services business in Asia with offshore worksites recently established throughout the region. For example, since 1989, MetroFin has established an offshored workforce of over 500 staff in Bangalore alone with 360 high-level information technology (IT) jobs sent there from its onshore location starting from 2002. Recent MetroFin workplace texts, such as their vision and corporate values statements champion ‘multi-diversity’ and ‘flexibility’ as global workforce practices and promote the importance of knowledge and skills sharing across the region. However, both on- and offshore managers and teams appear to be experiencing challenges in realizing this new vision, and their efforts appear to be made more difficult when working and communicating virtually. The following research questions are therefore explored in this article:

- (1) Are there problems related to virtual team communication at Metrofin revealed in the TNA?
- (2) If so, what are these problems and their characteristics?
- (3) How might these inform the training development for a MetroFin course to enhance virtual team communication?

In order to answer these questions, first I provide an overview of the current and relevant literature in the fields of business management, intercultural communication, linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as they relate to workplace settings in general, and specifically where studies have been completed, to virtual communication work teams. I then examine samples of key internal and external documentation that encapsulate the MetroFin corporate values, including extracts from the original Request for Proposal

(RfP); the RfP scopes the business view of the virtual communication problem. I report in detail on the TNA where manager and team member surveys were carried out and followed up by interviews. The final discussion suggests the causes (e.g. power struggles, identity confusion and job losses) of virtual team communication failure, as revealed in the TNA, and offers insights for training. I caution that treating the symptoms for virtual team failure (e.g. technology, meeting skills and perceived intercultural and language gaps) will not directly address the underlying problem of disempowerment and distrust over offshoring. This has important implications for training design and implementation. I will first explore current studies that have been carried out in communication in virtual and co-located work teams and their relevance to this study.

## **A review of the literature**

### ***VTM Studies in the business literature***

Much has been written in the business management and organizational behaviour literature about the impact of leadership, meeting skills, team characteristics, technology and the notion of ‘trust’ when managing and working in virtual teams; however fewer studies have explored the intercultural and linguistic issues of working in this context.

Studies in the business management and organizational behaviour fields have sought to explore the question of how virtual teams operate, what problems they experience and how they can be improved to meet business requirements. These studies are wide-ranging and have focused on issues such as leadership style and management skills in virtual teams (Chutnik & Grzesik, 2009; Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Walsh, 2011), the nature and composition of specific virtual teams (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005), technologies for virtual teamwork (Klitmøller & Luring, 2013) and the notion of ‘trust’ (Olsen & Olsen, 2012) as possible locations for improvement. Many of the studies stress the importance of ‘mindfulness’ in virtual leadership where relationship building and management is difficult without the affordances of regular face-to-face contact. Leaders therefore have to do what they normally do but be ‘more vigilant, purposeful and intentional about mitigating differences (e.g. culture, time and geography); about using effective leadership practices and about leveraging technology to build virtual work spaces that surpass ‘real’ ones’ (Walsh, 2011, p. 2).

Other studies have looked specifically at the nature and work of different virtual teams, for example, simple reporting work completed on a project versus collaborative knowledge-building and problem-solving. Understanding the differences in the nature and work of virtual teams is viewed as critical in deciding how best to manage and lead virtual work. Paulus, Kohn, and Dzindolet (2011) suggest that creative teams are highly interdependent and therefore need to meet and be managed responsively on a needs basis; they further report that team characteristics such as size, diversity, inter-disciplinarity, turnover, cohesion and task structure impact virtual management and communication to achieve optimal results. In other words, there is no prescribed way of managing teams as such; the complexity of the work being done, however, is key to understanding how and when such teams should meet and how they should be managed. This view is particularly pertinent to this study where some MetroFin teams do highly collaborative knowledge-building and problem-solving work as part of IT projects, whilst others regularly report to their onshore managers on routine operational progress. The expectations for meeting participation and input, and meeting management, are therefore somewhat different.

Hertel et al. (2005) take a different approach by summarizing recent research into the management of virtual teams in terms of the kinds of key activities that are evident in the

'lifecycle' of virtual team management; those being, preparation, launch, performance management, team development and disbanding. It is proposed that each part of this cycle presents unique and varied management and participation challenges, and therefore, different communication skills for virtual teams.

Leadership and trust are two dominant themes in the business management studies. Kayworth and Leidner (2002) suggest:

(that leaders) require a capability to deal with paradox, contradiction and uncertainty by performing multiple leadership roles simultaneously; act in a mentoring role and exhibit a high degree of understanding (empathy) toward team members; assert their authority without being perceived to be overbearing and inflexible and being effective at providing regular, detailed and prompt communication with their peers in articulating role relationships and responsibilities among virtual team members. (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002, p. 40)

Whilst such suggestions would also be equally valid in the leadership and management of co-located meetings, these leadership characteristics are seen as critical in virtual communication where face-to-face and chance meetings in corridors do not happen. The notion of 'trust' is discussed extensively in this literature with a distinction drawn between what researchers call 'swift trust' and 'earned' trust (Javenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Swift trust can be defined as that kind of immediately ascribed trust founded on expertise or authority. However, such immediate trust, they argue, is fragile and different from 'earned' trust which is developed over time with timely, predictable and well-considered responses and demonstrated work follow through by leaders. Such leadership virtues of trust, openness and dependability are proposed as key qualities in virtual team management but few studies have explored the communication and intercultural issues inextricably connected with such behaviours. Furthermore, many communication strategies are offered in this literature (see for example, Gibson & Cohen, 2003) but without a good understanding of how virtual communication using English as a lingua franca is impacted by corporate change and strategies, and how intercultural differences and second language impacts listening and speaking, such strategies may not be effective. This study contributes to this understanding by revealing how a group of key stakeholders at Metrofin see both the causes and the problems of virtual team communication when using English as the lingua franca, and how they may be mitigated (or not!) in communications training.

Intercultural differences have been explicitly raised as possible challenges when managing diverse virtual teams. Daim et al. (2012) found in their study that the problematic handling of cross-cultural differences was:

a significant differentiator in effective cross functional communication and leveraging benefits as the virtual teams comprise ethnically diverse members. (Daim et al., 2012, p. 203)

Other studies (see for example Dekker, Rutte, & Van den Berg, 2008; Henderson, 2005) have explored the issue of intercultural difference as a contributing factor to virtual team management communication using Scollon and Scollon (2001) and Hofstede (1994) approaches respectively to explore face loss in multicultural virtual teams and power distance. They concluded that perceptions of appropriate communication behaviours within the virtual teams differed across culture and that all members of virtual teams need to become aware of behaviour and communication expectations. Two further intercultural studies in the business management field have demonstrated the possible business opportunities of the intercultural composition of virtual teams. Janssens and Brett (2006)

suggest that superior outcomes in global virtual teams are achieved when the qualities of different cultures are combined. Shenkar (2011), on the other hand, in his study is critical of the void/gap metaphor in the international business studies where businesses assume something called cultural distance. He proposes replacing 'distance' with 'friction'. This new metaphor, he suggests:

is not merely semantic as it implies focusing on the interface between transacting entities rather than the void between them. (Shenkar, 2011, p. 9)

Whilst there is broad agreement that there are key differences and challenges in managing and participating in virtual teams as opposed to co-located teams, many of these business management and intercultural studies conclude that further investigation in the nature of language in the communication exchange in these meetings is needed.

Multinational companies are multilingual and each one will need to deal with the language barriers it encounters when expanding into countries that do not share its home country language. It is therefore surprising that language diversity has attracted so little attention in the field of international management and business. This is all the more remarkable as research into the role of language in organisations is well established. (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011, p. 279)

However, I argue in this paper that assigning communication failure solely to ethnicity or language problems masks more fundamental problems of misalignment around corporate offshoring strategies resulting in job loss and a sense of professional disempowerment and confused identities in the on- and offshore business.

Interestingly, the notion of 'trust' in this literature is reduced to a personal frontline management issue where attributes and behaviours of managers of virtual teams are the key focus of these studies. There is however, I would argue, an equally important issue of organizational trust where corporate values may be seriously misaligned with corporate practices and implementation policies. This is alluded to in the interview data findings discussed later in the article where offshoring is seen on the one hand as encouraging 'diversity, knowledge sharing and flexibility' and, on the other hand, as resulting in onshore redundancies. As well, later on in the data, offshore managers reported aspirational frustrations in not being able to 'live the corporate values' because of onshore management styles. Both can be seen as organizational distrust resulting in management misalignment. The impact of organizational distrust could provide an important area of further research in virtual team management and communication training.

### ***Linguistic and CDA studies in workplace settings***

Insights from linguistic and critical discourse theories may be highly relevant in understanding the root causes of communication difficulty in this virtual work context. Such studies, some using CDA, pursue themes of power relationships and workplace identity building. The changing nature of work in post-industrial times is variously described as capitalist reorganization (Foley, 1994); 'fast capitalism' (Gee, 1994), new capitalism and new work order (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), and neo-liberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005). However:

the common message coming from domains as varied as cultural theory, organization studies, management theory, sociology, literacy theory, and adult education, is that we are in the midst of significant organizational change. (Iedema & Sheeres, 2003, p. 317)

Insights from critical discourse analysts, such as Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen (2000) and Ruth Wodak (1989, 1995), have investigated the intricate relationship between power and language seeking to analyze 'opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 1995, p. 204). They have become increasingly interested in how the new globalized economy has impacted communication in the workplace (see for example, Cameron, 2000; Iedema & Wodak, 1999; Rhodes, Scheeres & Iedema, 2008) and on how new managerial requirements impact the construction of employee identities, through language use, at work. Of particular relevance to this article are the notions of 'textualization', 'commodification' or 'metadiscursive regimes' around new work practices. These have been the subject of a number of studies (see, for example, Darville, 1995; Jackson, 2000; Iedema & Sheeres, 2003; Park, 2013) where contemporary workplace discourses are reflected in corporate documentation and new practices:

where workers across a variety of sites are being confronted with having to renegotiate their knowing, their doing, and their work identity. (Iedema & Sheeres, 2003, p. 316)

These notions are of high relevance to this study where MetroFin promotes new ways of 'doing and being' (e.g. valued behaviours reflecting flexibility, multidiversity, collaboration and innovation) in its corporate literature. Such corporate 'textualisations' realize its aggressive strategic direction where offshoring product development and working collaboratively in virtual teams is fast becoming the norm. These metadiscourses of 'diversity management', 'flexible work management' and 'being excellent' can be seen to be part of the neo-liberal capitalist workplace (Iedema & Sheeres, 2003; Park, 2013) where:

the ideal neoliberal subject does not begrudgingly participate in work, but displays initiative, responsibility, and flexibility, willingly taking risks and engaging in projects of endless self-improvement instead of relying on past achievements, welfare, or solidarity. (Park, 2013, p. 560)

These new roles and identities are highly valued within MetroFin, and how they can be supported through training is at the heart of this study. If there is resistance and misalignment around these values and directions, which a critical stance would suggest, then it would seem logical that these would need to be confronted and addressed before participants, whether they be onshore or offshore, would be receptive to developing skills and strategies for improved communication in a training course.

Studies have also been carried out in the global service industry (see, for example, Heller 2003, 2010) where the 'workforce has become the wordforce' (Park, 2013, p. 560) and English is a key commodity. Linguistic analyses of the virtual communication in call centre work (see, for example, Forey & Lockwood, 2007) have identified second language customer services representatives struggling to communicate with native-speaker customers to meet the expectations of Western onshore management. Whilst there is scope for similar linguistic analyses of virtual team exchanges to reveal particular locations of communication difficulty, this article has been limited to how informants in



the MetroFin case study TNA perceive difficulties in communicating in this new work order as part of the TNA.

The value of these intercultural and linguistic insights into workplace communication may contribute to an improved understanding of the root causes of communication difficulty where language, culture, power and identity are key concepts in realizing the new metadiscourses of the changing globalized world of capitalism. Without this, training packages may simply be treating the symptoms of the problem without addressing the deeper issues.

### **The MetroFin case study**

#### ***The methodology***

Multiple sources were used in the needs analysis phase of this project, which took place over a period of 12 weeks. These included reviews of internal and external documentation, key stakeholder surveys and interviews and the observation and recording of VTM meetings. Given that company documentation encapsulates values, changes and strategic direction, it is important to understand how Metrofin is positioning itself for change and growth in the future, and what attendant problems (e.g. alignment around these) may be emerging. This is directly relevant to the first research question. In order to triangulate the findings, survey and follow up interviews with key stakeholders on- and offshore were conducted and analyzed. Two live virtual team meetings were observed and six onshore virtual team meetings at MetroFin were recorded and transcribed; these will be analyzed in a future study of how language is specifically used in the management of virtual team meetings.

#### ***The MetroFin TNA findings***

MetroFin has been undergoing rapid change in the last 10 years where offshored project and operational teams have been expanding and ‘matrix’ reporting lines have become normal business practice. ‘Matrix’ reporting in global workplaces can best be described as a situation where employees are often working in multiple teams and reporting to multiple managers, thus superseding the old, and perhaps more predictable work order of one-line reporting. These changes are reflected in the new workplace texts that promote work values such as collaboration, knowledge sharing, teamwork, flexibility and diversity. An analysis of these texts is important in this study because they reflect MetroFin’s core values and strategic priorities. As outlined in the previous section, such textualizations present managers and employees with new work practices and aspirations, around which workplace employees may find themselves misaligned. If this is the case, then communication will be impacted and what may appear to be a surface linguistic or intercultural misunderstanding may in fact be masking much deeper issues of identity threat and power play. Samples of these texts are exemplified and discussed in the next section.

#### ***The MetroFin corporate documents - The website***

Diversity is consistently highlighted in the website where it also says in the ‘values’ statement document:

We believe in the inherent strength of a vibrant, diverse and inclusive workforce where the backgrounds, perspectives and life experiences of our people help us to forge strong

connections with all our customers, innovate and make better decisions for our business. Our people have the opportunity to learn and progress with us, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, disability, religion and sexual orientation and professional background. (website accessed 5 April 2014).

Not only does this website highlight diversity, in all its forms, as a key aspirational characteristic of Metrofin, but it also states that this will add value to the business through innovation and better decision-making. Metrofin acknowledges that this will provide opportunities for learning and business improvements. Understanding how these employees engage with these values is key to evaluating the level of alignment and where the workforce may be supported through training. Some of the challenges are stated in the proposal document below and are further illuminated through the surveys and interviews.

### ***The MetroFin corporate documents – RfP***

The MetroFin RfP revealed a number of work team and management problems which are specified in the VTM programme requirements as follows:

MetroFin has a global structure with a matrix overlay and flexible work practices which means that many teams operate in situations where they are not physically co-located and where management practices need to be shaped to support the delivery of business outcomes in virtual teams. The skills and practices need to build on managing this diverse context and specifically manage the challenges and opportunities of virtual team management in a broad cross-cultural context.

Major challenges threatening work communication are revealed in the above statement. First the ‘matrix overlay’ where employees and managers have to deal with multiple reporting lines; second, ‘flexible work practices’ where employees may work only part-time and at home putting pressure on regular communication. Third, given that most teams will be multicultural in composition, first language and cultures will not necessarily be shared. These factors in themselves are possible barriers to smooth communication, but given that most of the teamwork is carried out virtually, the problems of relying on voice rather than face-to-face meetings may well exacerbate this work context. These issues relate directly to my first two research questions that probe the kinds of problems revealed in this part of the TNA for virtual workplace communication. This document further describes uncertainty, lack of trust and inappropriate micromanagement as current risks in the new work context and these in themselves perhaps set an agenda for training priorities and contributes to answering my third research question.

Managerial practices need to be transitioned to a new way of working in a global setting; there is uncertainty in the new world about how to succeed in this context, especially with the increase in offshoring of teams. We are not fully leveraging opportunities to learn and gain insights into improved processes from these changing work contexts. There is evidence that the effectiveness of management in remote or virtual contexts is diminished when people do not recognize the shift required, or are not given enough space to think about the challenges and address them specifically. Employee survey data has highlighted micromanagement, lack of trust, confused accountabilities stemming from lack of clear direction and poor relationship building in the remote and virtual team environment (RfP, 2013, p. 3).

This extract of the RfP is revealing in that MetroFin declares its failure to date in implementing its new work practices. Interestingly, there is a recognition of the time and

space needed for alignment around the new business strategy of offshoring and virtual teamwork, and this brings into question the efficacy of offering a one-day course.

### *The survey findings*

A virtual team survey comprising 38 questions was sent out to 100 MetroFin team members and managers both on- and offshore probing areas to do with technologies, communication and culture and meeting behaviours. Given that this survey was formally part of the TNA, there was an almost 100% response. Managers were mostly domiciled onshore, with 7% in India, whilst the participants were more scattered across the region with 21% of respondents offshore. There was a noticeable trend in the findings where the onshore managers reported more positively on the use of virtual team technologies, on communication and intercultural behaviours and on the use of management meeting skills, than participants offshore. Onshore managers felt, on the whole, that their virtual teams were going well. This finding was in stark contrast to their offshore team counterparts who appeared to feel disempowered, marginalized and frustrated in the virtual meetings run by onshore managers. This is evidenced in the survey where 25% of team members reported that they felt ‘unvalued’ in meetings whereas onshore managers gave a nil response for this question; the survey data further revealed that participants felt top down delegation, lack of strategic focus and micro-management to be prevalent in the management style.

Key differences in the data further pointed to how ‘silence’ in meetings was construed by onshore managers as an indicator of lack of confidence and nothing to say, whereas onshore managers and members viewed ‘talking a lot’ as a positive attribute while the participants did not, as shown below in [Table 1](#).

Critically, managers also attributed this to ‘taking the initiative’ (53%), a work practice highly valued in MetroFin. There may be cultural explanations for this finding to do with western work practice expectations that warrant further investigation. These findings are pertinent to the first research question and suggests gaps in communication that may relate to perceptions of power as well as cultural sensitivities when dealing with onshore authority.

### *The Interview findings*

The onshore managers interviewed were from a variety of departments and the offshore managers were local employees, typically at supervisor level. Pseudonyms for the managers are used for the purposes of confidentiality.

The interview data have revealed deep tensions in MetroFin’s strategic direction in offshoring.

Table 1. Question 22. If a team member talks a lot it is interpreted as (% for YES to that option).

	Manager (%)	Participant (%)
Important information to share	47	37
Dominating	33	37
Disrespectful	20	29
Taking the initiative	53	24

***Interview 1. Head of learning and development – Sally (onshore)***

Sally is Head of Learning and Development at MetroFin and emphasized MetroFin's commitment to flexible work practices where employees not only may elect to work part-time, but also work from home if they were employed onshore. However, working from home was not encouraged in the offshore context for legal, health and safety reasons. She further explained that the offshoring strategy required enhanced onshore managerial capability in working with diverse teams across MetroFin's 'regional hub' and this was the rationale for the 'Communicating in Virtual Teams' course. She said:

Managers are expected to maintain team focus and productivity in an era of redundancy and hub strategy. When MetroFin talks about change management, it is seen as a euphemism for redundancy. We find that on-shore managers often dominate on the phones where knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving practices should be happening. We don't know quite why collaboration is not happening; are they afraid Bangalore can do their jobs just as well? Team respect and open communication is sorely lacking and we want improvements here as a result of the VTM course.

Lack of trust, lack of meeting skills management, intercultural communication breakdown and technology instability were all reported by Sally as key challenges in managing virtual teams. However, it was clearly stated that the issue of redundancy should not be opened up for discussion as part of this programme although she agreed that this may be a major source of resistance and misalignment. This is an interesting comment and suggests that an analysis of authentic virtual team meetings may be an important area of further study where the language used would reflect such tensions and power struggles.

***Interview 2. IT project manager – Sam (onshore)***

Sam was generally positive about his team on- and offshore, and describes himself as a 'good communicator'. He reported however that knowledge sharing through technology did not happen as 'the onshore guys see it as losing their control'. This was an interesting observation given the discussion above, and perhaps this kind of 'passive resistance' could be a key challenge in effective management practices (and indeed training) in the future. He further reported that he did not feel that MetroFin technology supported the company's collaborative processes:

We're being asked to collaborate with our teams but our technology does not support this ... telepresence is hard to book so we rely on phones, concalls and emails. We need faster and more reliable communication technology.

Much has been written in the business management studies about the impact of technology where work teams are collaborating virtually (see, for example, Klitmoller & Lauring, 2013), and communication strategies for dealing with problematic technology would appear to be relevant for a MetroFin training programme. Interestingly in the interview, Sam referred to his IT team as a:

bunch of techies much more concerned with how systems work and how they can be improved than which location they work from.

This would suggest, as does the linguistic literature (see for example Jameson, 2007; Zaidman, 2001), that professional and other identities (for example, gender and socio-

economic status) can transcend national ones. This warrants further investigation in this context.

### ***Interview 3. Instructional design manager – Melanie (onshore)***

Melanie, an Australian, manages 60% of her team onshore and 40% in Bangalore. She strongly expressed the view that face-to-face time is essential as virtual teams start and continue to work together. However, she complained that due to cutbacks this no longer happens:

We used to have a swap program between Bangalore and on-shore with monthly exchanges ... this brought 8 Indians out here, but this has now been cut. We found once we had met our key team members face-to-face and had time to work and get to know each other, our projects went smoother and our teams seemed more productive.

This observation is in line with the business management research findings (see, for example, Gibson & Cohen, 2003). She went on to describe a specific MetroFin project in instructional design where she felt she had given clear instructions at a virtual planning meeting to the Bangalore team and got disappointing results; clearly communication had failed.

I thought I had been crystal clear in my instructions and checked they'd understood but obviously when they said 'yes' they meant 'no'.

Losing face in the event of not understanding what a manager has said was reported in intercultural communication workplace studies in Asia as a common issue (see, for example, Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Melanie also highlighted in the interview that 'matrix reporting' was a 'shock to the system' onshore where managers appeared to have a particular discomfort with this new work order. She said:

Unlike their colleagues off-shore, our guys (on-shore) are unfamiliar with managing multiple teams on multiple projects where the comfort of hierarchies and solid line accountabilities are now much more fluid and uncertain.

She further complained about the lack of knowledge sharing across the region and felt the 'values' of MetroFin relating to 'empowering' offshore colleagues and embracing 'multi-diversity' were not, in the main, being enacted in virtual team management behaviours onshore. Specific meeting behaviours relating to multi-tasking (e.g. answering emails when in the meeting) and putting themselves on mute during virtual meetings were also seen as problematic. She said:

You have to work harder in the virtual space to make meetings work; you can't actually see your members and the goals of the meetings need to be clear; agendas, minutes, follow up action points are key ... sloppy virtual meetings just don't work.

The difference in how on- and offshore teams were dealing with the changing strategy and management expectations in MetroFin revealed deep underlying tensions in the onshore and offshore work relationships.

***Interview 4. Operational team manager and project development participant – Vivek, India (offshore)***

Vivek, an Indian, is now an operational team manager in Bangalore but had previously worked onshore as part of a project team. He described MetroFin – Bangalore as an ‘operational hub’ while onshore is ‘the financial service’. He said:

In my team we focus on operational efficiency rather than the customer ... and because of that difference it can lead to a different approach in setting our objectives ... this is not made explicit and should be. I worked as part of a very collaborative team on-shore, but now that I am back in Bangalore the approach is very directive and top down ... ‘this is the way you do this’ rather than ‘what do you feel/think about the best way to do it?’. The team here has a lot to say about improvements but they don’t get asked...The new regional strategy also means job losses on-shore and managers have smaller teams which they want to protect ... so they just don’t want to collaborate and cooperate that much.

The observation about feelings of onshore control and job protection resulting in a lack of collaboration with offshore colleagues obviously makes the published MetroFin values and vision statement difficult to implement. Vivek further went on to explain that his teams feel undervalued and disempowered when it comes to problem-solving, and the meetings are often nothing more than discussions between the onshore members who seem to have ‘made up their minds’. He saw this as a possible threat to recent trends in offshoring development projects to Bangalore where knowledge-sharing and collaboration are critical. He further suggested:

On-shore managers are very good at ‘acculturation’ management, that is getting their teams to think and act on-shore, but this is not the point in VT. No one group of managers should feel privileged in that role. I know a lot more about how to handle my different team members out of Bangalore ... I’ve been doing it all my professional life. Maybe there is a great deal they can learn from us as ‘global citizens’ and used to communicating all over the place.

Vivek’s statement reveals a deep resentment towards onshore control. He implies that onshore managers do not have the kind of offshore global mindsets typical of his colleagues in Asia where working across the region has been the norm for a long time. Power rather than cultural differentials appear to be at play here. Further research analyzing the texts of authentic virtual team meetings would perhaps reveal how the discourse reflects power differentials brought up for discussion in these interviews, however this is not the focus of this article.

***Interview 5. Sales team manager and participant – Truc, Vietnam (offshore)***

Truc had many complaints about the lack of onshore preparation for the virtual meetings she attended as part of the regional sales team, and questioned the need for so many meetings that were nothing more than ‘information dumps’ from onshore managers.

I don’t know why we have these weekly meetings as they don’t really achieve anything more than finding out what is going on on-shore; we don’t feel really included in these discussions nor do we get clear agendas and documentation in preparation for the meeting, nor minutes and action points.

Again there is a strong suggestion in this excerpt that the power and control resides onshore and the meetings are simply to provide information and direction rather than to

collaborate and invite offshore participation. Truc also complained about the quality of the technology which she said made communication difficult. However, given the little value she placed on these meetings she was not prepared to invest locally (which is the onshore requirement) in technology upgrades as was the recommendation from the corporate IT group in MetroFin.

Whilst she did not complain about language breakdown, she felt teams onshore sometimes had difficulties understanding her colleagues' Vietnamese English and vice versa.

I wouldn't say that there is a lot of communication breakdown but there are difficulties sometimes for us understanding some of the on-shore idioms and the pace of their talk, and they sometimes find our accent difficult.

Accents, as a location of communication breakdown in workplaces, are well-documented in a number of studies (see for example, Cowie & Murty, 2010; Sharma, 2005) and this comment would suggest that familiarizing virtual team participants and managers with different regional accents would be beneficial listening training. Time differences also appeared to impact these virtual meetings where she complained her onshore counterparts never really acknowledged the unsociable hours for many of these meetings. This warrants further investigation and would imply either ignorance or disrespect of offshore participants' contexts.

#### ***Interview 6. Offshore team meeting participant – Rajev, Indian (offshore)***

Rajev reports into two regular virtual team meetings. As an IT engineer involved in a project developing new software and systems for MetroFin, his virtual team meeting experience appeared to be very different from his other virtual team meeting which involved reporting in on routine technology maintenance.

The IT project is great most of the time and we communicate well; once we know the specification we can get on with things and there is a lot of knowledge exchange ... and we're expecting more work to come to Bangalore in the coming months because there is recognized expertise here. The other meeting is pretty much a waste of time ... I just go on mute and do my emails ... I don't understand why we have these meetings really ... it's a waste and I don't need to be there. In fact no one in the maintenance team says much ... it's like taking a roll call, listening and then taking orders.

Interestingly, Rajev's earlier observation reflects Sam's comments about the particular cohesiveness within the IT engineering team and sense of its members feeling valued contributors, and this is in stark contrast to Vivek's view and Sally's concern that offshore employees being seen as just 'grunt workers'. This warrants further investigation in terms of virtual team management and perhaps suggests that there are important differences in the types of virtual team meetings and the requirements to meet and their respective approaches and skills in management. It is of interest and relevance for this study if there are different communicative requirements depending on the nature of the meeting as Rajev seems to suggest. Paulus, Kohn, and Dzindolet (2011) found that the more complex and collaborative the meeting, the higher demand this put on team communication in comparison to routine type information dissemination type meetings. Further investigation, perhaps through a linguistic analysis of authentic virtual team meetings convened for different purposes, may illuminate this question.

## Discussion

Whilst this study strongly suggests that further linguistic and critical discourse approaches to analyzing the authentic virtual team exchanges may reveal further underlying tensions, this paper has not set out specifically to provide that kind of analysis. As the research questions suggest, this study has been aimed at exploring the problems of virtual work team communication as expressed in the MetroFin TNA for the purpose of programme development.

Recurrent themes have emerged in this study, some of which could be categorized as root causes of problematic virtual team communication and others as symptoms. The causes relate to power differentials, misalignment around corporate values, professional identity struggles and fear of, and resistance to, offshoring. Without addressing these in the training support, the symptoms of poor technology quality, problematic leadership style, poor meeting skills and surface language use and cultural differences may simply mask the deeper issues. However, there appeared to be a reluctance within MetroFin to deal with the root causes evidenced in a key interview statement (see [Interview 1](#)) where Sally reported ‘off-shoring as a euphemism for redundancies’. However, she said this should not be brought up in the training. The directive was therefore understood by the training company to be ‘treat the symptoms, but not the causes’.

Given also that the training brief for delivery assigned only one day with no time for preparation or follow through, a question arises as to whether such an event would have any impact. This approach to corporate training is not unusual. Gaps in the way training solutions poorly reflect corporate vision and values are common (see for example, [King, 2014](#)). A Chief Executive Officer, whilst responsible for articulating the corporate vision, will rely on the executive team including the training department to achieve it. However:

quite often learning professionals are approached by department managers to provide training that addresses a particular need, much like ordering a product. While fulfilling ‘learning orders’ can keep you busy, it does not provide a contextual understanding of how the request relates to the business plan and the CEO’s vision. ([King, 2014](#), p. 5)

MetroFin’s training request appears to be little more than ‘fulfilling the learning orders’. This is an important area for research in corporate training where impact does not fully reflect needs and is often not measured, despite heavy investment ([Lockwood, 2002](#)).

Another important issue that emerged from the TNA related to the use of English being used as the lingua franca in MetroFin. Offshore managers and participants who are second language speakers of English talked about disempowerment and identity problems when interacting virtually with onshore native speaker managers. Very few studies have explored the role of language in communication breakdown in this virtual setting and these may better explain the significant disparity in the way on- and offshore colleagues viewed ‘silence’ and ‘overtalking’. It may well be the case that onshore managers are not aware of the kind of language they are using in their team meetings and therefore unaware of how this affects their team. This is a rich and important area of further research.

## Conclusion

This study has illuminated some key areas for further research in virtual team communication. Findings contribute to an awareness-raising within the business context as to how English as a lingua franca is being used to facilitate or frustrate virtual team communication in a global



setting. Without this perspective, the MetroFin training programme runs the risk of treating the surface symptoms as a 'learning order' exercise rather than dealing with the root causes related to identity, trust and empowerment in this new virtual work order.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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