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GVT CHALLENGES AT ARNHEM BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Abstract

We think that companies in Gelderland Region of the Netherlands and Noordrijn-Westfalen in Germany are beginning to adopt working in Global Virtual Teams (GVT) as a way to save cost and increase performance. Participation in the GVT-based projects allows students to experience the challenges of collaborating cross-culturally and virtually and aids them in forming more realistic expectations with respect to what it takes to successfully collaborate across cultural borders. Still, main challenges are represented by isolation, lack of verbal cues, the absence of cooperation, lack of communication, lack of cohesion and absence of commitment. This specific study evaluates the impact of GVT based experiential learning in business education at Arnhem Business School, the Netherlands. It tries to identify the major challenges global virtual teams face and existing frameworks for successful global virtual teams. We suggest expanding the GVT literature by using a case study of the Arnhem Business School students' experiences with GVT regards the challenges and opportunities that this type of learning environment can be suitable in the curriculum of higher education programmes. We look at the skills and competences that students might gain from taking part in GVT projects to be able to take proper advantage of prospective job opportunities offered by the companies.

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Keywords: Global Virtual Teams, GVT experiential learning, higher Education, virtual communication, X-Culture.



1. Introduction

Nowadays, virtual teams "are becoming common organizational structures"; the explanation for this situation is that firms are interested in specialized knowledge to execute the necessary tasks and firms are looking to distribute these tasks geographically (Iorio & Taylor, 2015, p. 395). This study in particular is looking at the challenges that are represented by the use of Global Virtual Teams in companies and the impact it has on the higher education institutions today. This specific study evaluates the impact of GVT based experiential learning in business education at Arnhem Business School, the Netherlands. It tries to identify the major challenges global virtual teams face and existing frameworks for successful global virtual teams.

2. Problem Statement

We think that companies in Gelderland Region of the Netherlands and Noordrijn-Westfalen (NRW) in Germany are beginning to adopt working in Global Virtual Teams (GVT) as a way to save cost and increase performance. We ask what is the perspective of managers of the skills needed to work effectively in a GVT? Do we train our students well enough to deliver professionals to the regional field market who possess these skills? Respectively, what possible changes should we make in the curriculum of Arnhem Business School (ABS)? Related to the supply and demand of skills that both companies and future professions need or have to work in GVT, we wonder how competent are our students to work in GVT, what are the skills companies need from them and how to behave (attitude) in a GVT to perform successfully?

3. Research Questions

Virtual teams allow organizations to be flexible, since virtual teams permit organizations to face the pressure generated by the increasing competition and business globalization, modify the organizational structures and answer to the growing consumer demand for efficient services (Purvanova, 2014). By using virtual teams, an organization can increase globalization and is able to benefit for a rapid knowledge transfer across different time zones (Heller, 2010). Related to the supply and demand of skills that both companies and future professions need or have to work in GVT, we wonder how competent our students are to work in GVT? What are the skills companies need from potential employees to perform successfully in a GVT? What are the skills and attitudes needed to operate in a Global Virtual Team? What are the challenges ABS students have regarding working in a GVT? How well prepared are the ABS students to overcome these challenges?

4. Purpose of the Study

This research tries to identify the major challenges global virtual teams face and existing frameworks for successful global virtual teams. We suggest expanding the GVT literature by using a case study of the Arnhem Business School students' experiences with GVT regards the challenges and opportunities that this type of learning environment can be suitable in the curriculum of higher education programmes? We look

at the skills and competences that students might gain from taking part in GVT projects to be able to take proper advantage of prospective job opportunities offered by the companies in Gelderland Region of the Netherlands and Noordrijn-Westfalen (NRW) in Germany.

5. Research Methods

The research context for the present study was student participation in the X-Culture project (www.X-Culture.org). X-Culture is an ongoing educational activity in which university students participate in GVTs in order to prepare a business proposal. Students were assigned to teams of five to seven members, each member from a distinct country. In their teams, the students chose a real-life company from an approved list and developed a business plan for that company to expand into a foreign market with an existing or a new product or service for example. Participation in the GVT-based project allowed students to experience challenges and form more realistic expectations with respect to intercultural and international virtual teams. This study evaluates the impact of Global Virtual Team - based experiential learning in business education at Arnhem Business School. This research made use of the extensive data available over a period of 2 years from the X-culture participants from last semester of 2015 till last semester of 2017 (5 seasons, approximately 4000 students per season, around 800 teams of students from more than 40 different countries per season); the Arnhem Business School participants in the project (66 students and 2 instructors) and 14 SME's in the region of Arnhem and Nijmegen, who had interest in Global Virtual Teams.

Post-project surveys applied to participating groups and to a control group of Arnhem Business School students reveal significant learning in terms of perceived difficulties related to participating in a GVT. This study provides evidence for the usefulness of GVT-based approaches and facilitates a better understanding of the challenges and learning opportunities in using this type of experiential learning activity. Evidence is based on longitudinal waves of surveys responses from undergraduate business students before, during, and after participation in the X-Culture project, starting with the pre-project survey of the students and instructors; weekly surveys and data records during the project and post-projects surveys, interviews and evaluations. Various measures of individual and team performance and outcomes, including multi-dimensional and multi-rater assessment of the team report quality, ability to meet deadlines, satisfaction, peer evaluations and the like were taken as well as original team reports and other records suitable for qualitative and content analysis. The data from the internationally X-Culture administered surveys were analysed, presented with basic descriptive statistics, and coding. To evaluate the impact of having participated in the X-Culture project, this study relied on two sources of data: 1) X-Culture, internationally administered, pre-, mid-, and post-project surveys and 2) a study-specific, locally designed and administered post-project survey at Arnhem Business School.

6. Findings

Taking into account the comments and feedback from both the students and companies interviewed, this study specifically measured perceptions of difficulty and challenges directly related with the virtual aspects and students rated their perceptions of difficulty arising from:

6.1. Time Zones / Physical Distance

Psychic distance represents one of the central, yet highly controversial, concepts in international business research (Blomkvist and Drogendijk 2013). The main reason for which virtual teams are becoming common is represented by the fact that workers having specialized knowledge can be hired regardless of their locations (Plotnick, Hiltz, & Privman, 2016). The response of the companies we have interviewed regarding the matter of physical distance (virtual distance) were mostly positive. They interpreted indeed the virtual teams in these sense as a cost saving tool for the company rather than a challenge. Only one of the SME's we contacted said that due to the less "old fashioned" "social interaction, they as management may feel inadequate to manage such virtual teams. This was based on the lack of experience of the company with global virtual teams. Measuring performance was mentioned as nor a challenge or a routine, but it was more emphasized as a responsibility of the team leader to take upon, which gives the impression of larger degree of delegation and freedom of choices for the team itself.

Some of the SME's mentioned that many maybe the positive energy gained during face-to-face meeting between team members is extremely difficult to obtain in virtual teams which has been mentioned before in the literature (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002). When it came to the Arnhem Business School students, they expressed their worries regarding the time rather than the distance. Since virtual teams include members all over the world, it was extremely important for our students to better schedule meetings at a jointly agreed time (which indeed it was a challenge). The poor online interaction of the team members due to different time zones was clearly mentioned as the ABS students are used with applied sciences concepts and are more hands on project students, rather than conceptual and theoretical.

6.2. Intercultural / Language / University Differences

Regarding language and the intercultural aspect of the GVT's, ABS students consider strong English language skills (written and spoken) are essential, reinforcing the findings of other studies (Shachaf & Hara, 2010). Since virtual teams have as characteristic cultural diversity, the ABS students pointed out that it is important that team members discover enough information regarding the numerous cultures that are represented by team members. In order to learn about diverse cultures, team members should make a background research and get in contact with other students who were part of global virtual teams. It is important that virtual team members avoid stereotypes regarding different cultures. Stereotypes can conduct to wrong judgments, different kind of assumptions and misinterpretations of team members belonging to different cultures. Still, looking into detail at the written feedback sessions and the mid-project surveys, our students had difficulties with cultural stereotypes, which imposed themselves. The companies that were interviewed pointed out that a major challenge of using global virtual teams is how to engage people all over the world with different cultural backgrounds and align them with a common vision in order to accomplish company's goals. Some of the companies said that the success of the virtual team depends on team skills to accommodate to the new cultures. They expect that the virtual team should have a strong cultural training, must be focused to encourage each team member's strengths, to praise each member contribution and help members solve their intercultural problems. Weather if this expectation is real, is another thing. We had the impression that the companies expected that indeed the future employees who work in global virtual teams should and could manage their own intercultural or language issues.

University differences was a very interesting challenge that all of ABS students mentioned. Being used with the standards at Arnhem Business School regarding academic writing, APA referencing style, report writing skills, etc., they expected that the other virtual team members would have the same standards. “My team member has been extremely rude to me. I understand that the point of this assignment is to become familiar with working with people from other cultures but they tend to blame any issue on culture and I find that hard to agree with. I also find the time zones and differing customs like allowing plagiarism and having awkward means of communication silly” (extract from the post surveys with ABS students).

6.3. Trust / Leadership / Team issues and differences

Building of trust among team members is seen as the decisive factor for virtual team success, according to numerous researchers (Kirkman et al., 2002; Laurito, 2010; Paul, Drake, & Liang, 2016), since trust is considered to be “the glue of the global workplace” (Kirkman et al., 2002, p. 69). This issue was mentioned by all of the ABS students in their feedback sessions; which gives a clear indication of what the literature already pointed out. According to Laurito (2010), creating trust is a process that is done usually through face-to-face meetings among team members. That is why trust is maybe seen as a big issue in virtual teams. Still, continuous communication is extremely helpful in building cohesion and trust among team members (Laurito, 2010), which was pointed out as well by some of our students. Team issues and differences based on the skills of the group leader or members was often mentioned by our students. They pointed out that team members of global virtual teams should understand their purpose, direction and roles as part of the team, but they also should know what the expectations of team leaders are. It is important to define and create clear goals for the entire team in order to help individuals to direct their efforts to work in the same direction. Otherwise, any lack of common understanding among team members will generate misguided work and this will lead to wasting time. Still in order to be a successful team, the main ingredient is trust, since trust is seen as the “glue” of global virtual teams. It is highly important that team members trust each other and understand each other. Lack of trust can lead to fear of accepting mistakes and weaknesses. Consequently, becomes much more difficult for team members to ask for help as experienced by the ABS students.

6.4. Communication

Since numerous team members in virtual teams may never have face-to-face contact or may never work together in person, a large variety of problems may appear (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012). ABS students pointed out that team members should avoid using jokes, idioms and slangs, since not every member on the team may understand some terms. Consequently, common terms were recommended to be used inside virtual teams. Depending on each member nationality, one may understand better verbal communication, while other member may understand better written communication. That is why multiple channels of communication are extremely important for virtual teams in order to support the best means of understanding. At ABS, students perceive virtual teams as a benefit to what the Arnhem Business School already offers as modules and extracurricular activities. Most of the students joined the x-culture programme not from curiosity but believing to add a new virtual experience that otherwise would not have had the chance to. Our students experiences sort of a privilege by being able to communicate very well in

English as they pointed out that many students from other countries in their teams were lagging behind because of it.

6.5. Plagiarism

To emphasize the importance of plagiarism for our students regarding the global virtual teams' projects participation, here are some good examples extracted from the post project survey held: " I have not enjoyed this experience. I have a team member who is extremely negative, demeaning, and plagiarizes everything. He uses "culture" as an excuse for not being hardworking or on time...time zones, and other bogus issues that everyone deals with. I feel that I and two other group members are the only people constantly on time and turning in quality original work".

Other ABS student said:" The idea and aim of the x-culture experience is on point when looking at the globalized environment and the topic of "virtual teams". I enjoyed working with different cultures i.e. the Dutch institution vs other institutions show many interesting differences. For me it was a continuous hassle to deal with a lack of amount of input, English language, quality of the work. e.g. members did not stick to guidelines, some pieces were poor English that it was impossible to understand, large pieces were copy-paste and almost no pieces have references to sources. In my opinion, the x-culture coordinators should have better or more strict entrance demands i.e. English language and processing capacity of academic literature, and members must be aware that plagiarism is not tolerated. This would result in a more efficient team work which will in turn lead to better reports and more satisfied participating companies." Most of the students mentioned that "plagiarism should not be acceptable!" and clear academic writing standards should be imposed. Some students even came up with more solutions to this problem: "in terms of work, I would explain the APA-style of referencing from the start as the act of plagiarism is much more an issue at my university than at theirs. Furthermore, I would try to be more pro-active from the start regarding specific agreements as we had no agreements to fall back on".

6.6. Motivation / Participation / Free riders / Workload

Another key challenge for virtual team leaders is represented by the ability of these leaders to motivate and inspire team members. In order to enhance motivation, enhance trust, increase team cohesion and finally obtain performance, virtual team leaders should continuously communicate with each one of the team member (Lilian, 2014). Motivate team members, build trust, evaluate team members' results, built cohesion and resolve conflicts across distance is difficult and adequate practices are necessary to cover these aspects (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). Students expressed their concern regarding different level of commitment due to different importance that the project has in respective universities. They mentioned, "lack of commitment is the main issue of most of the conflicts. It seems like working in a company where many other managers and employees do not have any interest in company's objectives". They speak of compromise relying on each other respect and commitment when it comes to virtual teams projects to be successful. "This is getting frustrating without anyone who can actually lead and motivate my team" was one of the challenges that the ABS students struggled with as well. Our students experienced motivation and participation issues, along with heavy workload and tolerance of the free riders in the group due to virtual communication as well. Still, they acted immediately upon it by taking charge of planning meeting and enforced communication deadlines and open discussions.

6.7. Technology

In order to guarantee the success of this virtual growing workplace model ensured by virtual teams, best technology and practices are necessary (DuFrene & Lehman, 2012). Both the companies and the ABS students we interviewed recognized the same needs for technology when it comes to facilitating global virtual teams. Regarding Arnhem Business School, the lack of a proper technology where students could “meet up” virtually was mentioned in the both the interviews and the feedback sessions. Students brought up different possible virtual settings that may have enhanced their abilities to communicate virtually. In order to keep a functional team, virtual employees should be very good in using the communication technology, since communication technology is the decisive factor in virtual team coordination (Kirkman et al., 2002).

The companies we have interviewed mentioned a big trend when working and communication virtually. In a “glocal” setting where local companies need to act globally, the use of modern communication and technology is inherent to daily operations. Their employees must be able to act accordingly and virtually communicate at ease while projects can globally interlink (different deadlines, time zones, means of communication etc). They see virtual teams as opportunities where professionals and talented management professionals can develop their skills. This is what ABS students experienced as well. These drawbacks of virtual communication are known. In order to deal with them, some extra effort added into the process can help as well as sharing information. Students suggest that team leaders should take action regarding this matter, which was also shown in the literature.

7. Conclusion

Virtual teams present disadvantages (challenges) such as misunderstandings, feelings of loneliness and isolation, the poor team leadership and the difficulties of coordinating activities Purvanova (2014). Moreover, virtual team members who are connected through different communication tools, without face-to-face interaction, may have different expectations regarding the collaborative behavior among team members. Still, main challenges are represented by isolation, lack of verbal cues, the absence of cooperation, lack of communication, lack of cohesion and absence of commitment. In one word, collaborating effectively is a common challenge for virtual teams (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Laurito, 2010).

Plagiarism, free-riders and lack of motivation came up as a very clear impediment for the ABS students who participated in the global virtual teams project. Companies we interviewed noticed the advantages of virtual teams as well. International, intercultural academic experiences provide students with a preview to the real-world, globally interconnected workplace. Participation in the GVT-based project allows students to experience the challenges of collaborating cross-culturally and virtually and aids them in forming more realistic expectations with respect to what it takes to successfully collaborate across cultural and national borders via virtual means. These skills will prove essential in the students’ future professional life. Whilst this article does not seek to generate generalisations, it does attempt to capture common themes at Arnhem Business School, which may, or may not, be relevant to universities outside of this study. Still in this sense the present research can be further rolled into a more comprehensive and extensive research by interviewing different stakeholders such as other students, business field agencies,

governmental institutions that can provide a total different angle of what kind of challenges global virtual teams face and existing frameworks for successful global virtual teams.

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