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Getting to know you: The importance of familiarity in virtual teams

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“Sue, I didn’t know you were such a world traveler. But, look at those pictures on your wall – did you go to all those places?”

“I love working with Gina, we were lucky to find her and have her join our team during the pandemic! She is great with numbers – she can really get them to tell a story. It is weird though; I know nothing about her and am not even sure what she looks like as she never turns on her camera. But, I would have her on my team any day!”

The above quotes are both from recent video calls that one of the authors was on. What is interesting about the first exchange is that the teammate who said this to Sue had worked with her, in person, for over 10 years. However, now that we are, for the first time, entering each other’s homes on a daily basis, we are actually starting to learn more about our teammates than ever before – we are meeting our colleagues’ children, seeing their pets, and getting a more detailed glimpse into both how they work, and their personal lives. This idea that working virtually is allowing us to become more familiar with our teammates runs counter to what much of the early virtual teams research suggested and the apprehension held by many people about working in a virtual team. In fact, some of the earliest concerns raised by people when assigned to a virtual team was the fear of being lonely, feeling isolated from other team members, being unable to judge the quality of someone else’s work, and that technology would limit their ability to form bonds with others on the team. In part, these fears were based on one of the espoused benefit of virtual teams that is, efficiency based on the ability to place the best people on the team regardless of their physical location or time zone. Meaning, no consideration was given to team member familiarity or value placed on non-work interactions “water-cooler talk.” In contrast, in the second quote, the team member is acknowledging they know

nothing about the personal life of their teammate Gina, but yet because they are familiar with her work (she is good with numbers), they would like to keep working with her. The value of relationships or team member familiarity raises an interesting question – does it actually help virtual team performance if members know more about the people they are working with? Furthermore, does it matter what you know about them?

We know that relationships matter. Some of our fondest childhood memories are of friends, someone to swap secrets with, share a common language or handshake, a special code to get into the tree house, and somebody you can always call upon to ask for help. As we grow older and form deeper friendship and professional relationships this circle of people becomes a support network, but remains a group we can rely upon to help us through tough times both personally and professionally. Therefore, it is hardly surprising, that strong relationships are a key predictor of trust in work teams. In fact, one of the earliest findings from the virtual team’s research was that teams that had met at least once face-to-face consistently outperformed those that had not done so. The rationale for this finding was that meeting face-to-face at least once helped member’s better understand each other’s communication patterns, build trust, and help establish some level of relationship. With improvements in technology, the physical face-to-face meeting has become less important. Technology now allows team members to *feel* like they are in a face-to-face meeting and, as the opening quotes suggest, become really connected. In fact, technology often goes a step deeper in allowing team members to get a closer look into each other’s lives, work habits, and areas of expertise. Accordingly, it is important that we understand the importance of relationships, bonds, and feelings of connectedness between virtual team members and how these relationships affect team performance.

However, if we go back to the playground – we can all remember instances where only picking your friends to be on your team did not guarantee success. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that teams built with members who are friends may spend too much time and attention on their relationship to the detriment of task performance. As such, this presents a conundrum of whether having strong connections between team members is actually a benefit or not within teams, and whether this relationship is different in virtual teams. In response, this article will address the importance of both personal and professional familiarity for virtual team performance and offer a series of tips on how to build stronger relationships with work colleagues that you might never meet face-to-face.

INTRODUCTION

The 2017 Gallup State of the American Workplace Report indicated that 43% of full-time employees worked remotely, or as members of a virtual team. These numbers have certainly grown exponentially since COVID19. However, what this 43% number suggests is that even before it was a necessity, almost half of all employees relied on some form of electronic communication to conduct their work. What COVID19 has done is accelerate the shift to remote work resulting in many organizations scrambling to help their employee's transition to a fully virtual context. In response, there has been a tidal wave of recommendations for how leaders and teams can best navigate this *new normal* and how members should interact with one another so that performance is not negatively affected when relying solely on computer-mediated communication. However, an often overlooked facet of virtual team success remains the importance of team member familiarity.

FAMILIARITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL TEAMS

Familiarity is one of those terms; we all know what it means, we know it when we see it, but when asked, we struggle to define it. Research tells us that teams whose members describe themselves as being more familiar with one another have higher levels of trust. Students who bring a friend to work with them on experimental tasks do better than those assigned a stranger. In organizational settings, research finds that coal miners who are more familiar with their coworkers, have fewer accidents. Likewise, professional sports teams who have played longer together, tend to win more games. What this all suggests is that higher levels of familiarity lead to stronger relationships, knowing what to expect from someone else, as well as better coordination and communication that together, all positively enhance decision making quality and improve individual and team performance. However, a friend is not the same as a coworker, and there are times when we want to work with our friends. Other times, we want to work with a colleague who we might not know much about personally, but we know they have the knowledge and expertise that will complement our skills, and finally, there are times when working with a professional acquaintance is quite simply the better option. With this in mind, we contend that to fully understand familiarity and its impact on team dynamics, we need to consider the actual

type of familiarity that exists between team members. In our research, we separate personal from professional familiarity and look at how they individually influence team performance. So let us start by describing what we mean by personal and professional familiarity.

Personal familiarity is the extent to which team members know the values, attitudes, beliefs, likes/dislikes, hobbies, and family situations of their teammates. In contrast, professional familiarity centers on the extent to which individuals on a team know the work-related strengths, weaknesses, competencies, and individual characteristics such as dependability and attention to detail of others on the team. In the team's literature, most of the attention has been given to professional familiarity. Here, researchers consistently find that professional familiarity has a positive impact on team dynamics and performance. However, when working in teams, individuals in teams can, and often do, learn a great deal about the personal lives of their teammates and build strong ties based on personal familiarity.

To understand the role of personal and professional familiarity in virtual teams, we engaged in a large-scale study of global virtual teams working for a multi-national information technology company spanning 10 different countries including China, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Taiwan, and the United States. Over several months, we collected data using multiple online surveys from team members, as well as having internal team leads and external team managers rate the teams on a number of important performance metrics. Below we detail some of the results from this study and offer tips for managers who are striving to build familiarity in their virtual teams.

FAMILIARITY IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Virtual teams are often constructed to put the best people on the team for the task. In addition, virtual teams were originally touted as a means to increase workforce efficiency, as there should be no time lost to social norms such as chatting, or the need to exchange pleasantries, and small talk. Start the call, log into Zoom, and get right down to business. While this might sound great, it does not take into account the role that human interactions, connections, and relationships play in sharing and more importantly integrating information that ultimately results in tasks being accomplished at a high level. To improve performance, information elaboration is key. Information elaboration is more than just sharing information among team members. At its essence, information elaboration includes openly exchanging information, seeking clarification on the information that is shared, as well as fully discussing and integrating new and discrepant information. As such, teams whose members share unique perspectives and know that others will fully consider, discuss, and integrate the differing pieces of information have higher levels of information elaboration. In turn, information elaboration helps teams be more successful.

While information elaboration sounds great, developing a shared understanding can be challenging in a virtual context where there are fewer non-verbal cues, members may experience communication delays, and messages are often perceived as less clear. Of note here is that while information

sharing is important, researches have long found, somewhat counterintuitively, that team members mostly share only the information that is common among members, meaning unique information is often not made available when it comes to decision-making. Not surprisingly, sharing and integrating unique or non-redundant information is critical for team success and is, in large part, the rationale behind creating diverse teams where individuals have different backgrounds, experiences, and expertise. However, getting individuals to share, integrate, and ultimately use diverse information is key. Our research finds that team member familiarity is the precursor to information elaboration. Meaning, that when team members are more familiar with each other, they are more likely to share and integrate a broader swath of information, and it is the relationships that exist between team members that affect their ability to integrate and use unique relevant information.

In our study, of nearly 400 individuals working in 68 global virtual teams, we asked members to rate how well they knew everyone else on their team both personally and professionally. Next, we asked about information elaboration, did team members exchange a lot of information, say things that lead other members to learn something new about their tasks, and how well members listen to, and consider input, even when it is substantively different from their own. We also had team members rate their reliance on technology to communicate, a variable we label ‘extent of virtuality.’ Here, we found that some teams were 100% virtual meaning all their communication was conducted via technology while other teams relied on some face-to-face communication. However, all the teams in our sample utilized technology to communicate to some extent and therefore all the teams studied were, to differing degrees, virtual.

When looking at virtuality more carefully, we found that the type of computer-mediated channels used by teams varied greatly. For example, 18% of teams relied on email, 17% relied on conference calls, 8% were able to meet face-to-face, and 12% used instant messaging/texting. By examining the types of technology-mediated tools used by the teams and the informational value that these tools afford (i.e., instant messaging is a much weaker media than video-conferencing), we were able to classify teams along a continuum of virtuality and thereby able to assess the impact of virtuality. Lastly, to understand team performance we asked *team leads* to evaluate their team’s viability. Team leads can be thought of as the ‘first among equals,’ they are still considered to be members of the team, but at the same time they hold some leadership responsibilities. Viability captures their views on whether the team should, and is capable of continuing to work together. In contrast, *team managers* are individuals at the next hierarchical level in the organization to whom the team reports. These managers rated each team on their ability to deliver products by the targeted delivery date and whether products delivered were of high quality. Meaning, was the teams output valued by internal and external customers.

In examining this data, we found that professional familiarity had a positive impact on information elaboration. This means that when team members know more about the work-related strengths, weaknesses, competencies and work styles of others on the team, they are more likely to share information, help others learn something new about the

task, and incorporate their own knowledge with the information that is being shared. Not surprisingly, information elaboration resulted in teams being rated more highly by their managers on delivering valued products to internal and external customers in a timely manner. In addition, the professional familiarity - information elaboration relationship also resulted in teams being rated as more viable or more likely to be able to continue working together. With the high costs associated with employee turnover and onboarding new team members, pinpointing factors that can increase viability within a team is not a trivial finding. Given that professional familiarity had such a strong effect on information elaboration, performance, and team viability, it behooves managers of virtual team to consider ways to ensure that team members are professionally familiar with one another. Tips to address this will be offered later in this article.

In comparison, personal familiarity (e.g., knowing the habits, hobbies, and personal information about your teammates) was not consistently important in influencing information elaboration and subsequent performance. That is not to say that it was not valuable. In fact, for some teams, possessing personal familiarity was helpful, but for others it was less so. As such, there was not a clear pattern for this relationship that seemed to hold for all teams. However, the most interesting finding in terms of personal familiarity was that its effect became stronger as teams became more virtual. In our study, while all teams were virtual, some were *more virtual* than others. Meaning, that while some teams relied solely on technology to communicate, others had members who were co-located, or had the ability to, on occasion, meet face-to-face. Likewise, as described above the tools used by teams to communicate varied in their level of information value and teams that used tools with less information value were even more virtual. What our findings here suggest is that for the more virtual teams, personal familiarity played a key role in viability and performance (via information elaboration) however, for teams that were less virtual, this form of familiarity was less important.

For teams with a greater reliance on technology to communicate, personal familiarity is important for information elaboration and subsequent performance and viability. With the onset of COVID19, this finding takes on more relevance than ever. While personal familiarity might not be that important when members can meet face-to-face, with more and more teams interacting almost entirely virtually, managers may want to consider ways to build personal familiarity within their teams — especially those that are more virtual and rely on certain leaner communication tools. So, while it is debatable as to whether you should try to build personal familiarity in all teams, the results of our study suggest that it is a valuable to create personal familiarity in teams that interact mostly or entirely through virtual means.

IMPLICATIONS

Relationships matter. We know that this sentiment is true whether we are talking about children on the playground or within successful marriages. However, our study indicates that this sentiment also holds true in professional settings for virtual teams. The long held fear that using technology to

communicate within teams was not a viable way to develop or sustain personal and professional relationships no longer holds. In fact, many marriages today are between people who met online. So, times certainly have changed! The results of our study suggest that managers should carefully consider ways to build professional familiarity between their team members. Sharing information on work styles, expertise, and prior professional experiences is not a waste of time, or an efficiency drain. Instead, taking these concrete steps to build professional familiarity between team members should be considered as yet another way to enhance performance. In teams, information elaboration is critical. Without it, completing complex tasks is near impossible and errors are more likely to happen. The finding that professional familiarity increases information elaboration should give managers a very tangible tool that when applied will help their teams succeed.

Likewise, our results suggest that personal familiarity also plays an important role in shaping information elaboration for teams that are more virtual. In fact, it is when teams are more virtual, that personal familiarity appears to garner its true benefit. So, while some teams and managers are inclined to jump right into the task and focus all conversations solely on task-related topics, we argue that this will be particularly problematic for virtual teams. Instead, our results suggest that taking the time within virtual teams to ask team members to share information on their hobbies, kids, and pets is not only *a nice thing to do*, but it is also a way to help your team members build personal familiarity bonds that will in turn, enhance information elaboration and subsequent team performance and viability.

HOW TO BUILD FAMILIARITY WITHIN TEAMS

Professional Familiarity. For teams that do not have a history of working together, are newly formed, have added new members, or where managers feel that additional work is needed to continue to develop professional familiarity, we offer below a number of examples of ways in which professional familiarity can be built:

- Create a repository where all members can post (and other members can view) information about their prior work experiences. This repository can include information such as:
 - Things about their work background,
 - Projects they have worked on before,
- This repository could be updated throughout the life of the team so that individuals who have not had the chance to work with others on the current project are better aware of what others are doing on the current project even if they are not involved with that portion of the project.
- Develop a team charter. Team chartering can leverage the information shared within the team repository (see above) as well as individual members' preferences such as:
 - Roles they like to take on project teams,
 - Ways they prefer to work.
- When starting a new project or task, take time to ask each team member what their experience is with this or a

similar task. Care should be taken to ask probing questions so answers are more detailed and team members are able to gain an in-depth knowledge of what others have worked on previously. Their experiences with a similar task, along with what they learned from this work can enhance levels of professional familiarity.

- Structure the task in a way where individuals on a team have the chance to work with everyone at different points in the team's lifecycle. To do this, managers may need to strategically rotate assignments throughout the team. Doing this eliminates the tendency for individuals to only work with a small subset of the team and only build strong professional familiarity with a few members. By consciously assigning tasks so that this rotation occurs, managers ensure that there is more experience built up between all members of the team and thereby professional familiarity throughout the team should be enhanced. Beyond creating professional familiarity throughout the team, this approach also has the benefit of breaking down silos or faultlines that may otherwise form within a team.

Personal Familiarity. Again, this form of familiarity appears primarily important within highly virtual teams. Managers and team members may want to consider the following ways in which to build personal familiarity within their virtual teams:

- Take a few minutes in each meeting and give individuals a chance to share something personal about themselves.
- Have social times at regular intervals where individuals can talk together about non-work interests (hobbies, etc.)
- Plan conversations/activities around personal familiarity that members feel comfortable sharing. Structure mechanisms to enhance personal familiarity as a *free choice* type of arrangement. This point is critical and requires a leader of the team to know his/her teammates and what they are comfortable sharing or not sharing as the last thing you want to do is create a situation where a team member is forced to share information that they do not want to share.
- Start team meetings with a game or something fun. On a team that one of the authors is on, each individual who wanted to *play* sent a baby picture to the meeting coordinator. This coordinator then shared the pictures one by one and people on the team guessed who the baby was. This activity led to a spontaneous discussion of where people grew up, whether they were the first born in their families, their current families, etc. So, while this particular type of activity may not be what you choose for your team, doing something that is fun for your virtual team and creates an opportunity to learn more about your teammates on a personal level is the goal.
- We also suggest that the leader of the team should arrive at virtual team meetings a few minutes early. This will allow the team leader to initiate some organically generated personal communications with the first team member who joins. The conversation can then be extended to the next member and so forth. This form of *small talk* not only appears organic, but tells members that it is okay to ask one another about their weekend, a recent holiday, or the like.

Note: While some of the suggestions that we outline for building personal familiarity suggest that the team has videoconferencing technologies at hand, this may not be the case for *more virtual* teams and the leader of the team may need to create different opportunities for team members to develop this form of familiarity. For instance, rather than sharing the pictures synchronously on a call, members may have to post information about themselves on a shared room and people can view this material as they can and this may be the only option within more virtual teams that do not interact as often through richer forms of communication. However, this may also suggest that for efforts to build personal familiarity, teams may need to use richer forms of communication than they normally do for their day-to-day activities. As such, leaders may call a special all-hands on deck meeting once per month to cover important material and use these sessions to also try to build some personal familiarity.

Additionally, while we introduce the chartering tip above as a means to enhance professional familiarity, we think that it is an important step in setting the foundation for personal familiarity in virtual teams as well. Namely, chartering discussions should include laying out expectations of what types of technology will be used and perhaps more importantly how the features of such tools will be used. For instance, tools such as MS Teams allow users to blur out their backgrounds. While this may be helpful in certain situations, it does not afford virtual team members the opportunity to gain the insights about their teammates that our opening scenario depicts – i.e. team members learning more about their teammates' lives because they can see their home offices, etc. As such, the chartering discussion may want to discuss what the norms and expectations are for using such

features and perhaps laying out times when such features are used and times when they are not used. Again, managers need to know their team members and appreciate their individual situations and whether they are comfortable showing their home workspaces or not. If not, a creative solution may be to have members use a new picture as their background each month with a place that they visited and this will allow them to maintain some privacy around their home environment but still allowing others to learn more about them on a personal level.

CONCLUSION

Virtual team are here to stay. More and more people are working in teams that no longer have the option to meet face-to-face and the need for personal interactions is real. Our research finds that relationships also play a very important business role – they help teams be more successful and remain more likely to want to work together in the future. In order to be successful, virtual team members need to freely share, exchange, and integrate information. This sharing and integrating is inherently a social phenomenon that is enhanced when team members have a stronger relationship with one another built upon familiarity. Our findings suggest that professional familiarity is the more salient of the two for all types of teams in terms of its impact on information elaboration. However, when teams are more virtual, personal familiarity becomes increasingly important. Small talk about hobbies and families is not trivial, sharing work prior experiences is not bragging - this information is what can make the difference between teams that deliver on time high quality work and those that do not.



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