

Cooperation through diversity – communication tools in a virtual work environment

Ewa Bujak

Monika Chutnik

University of Economics

Komandarska Street 118/120, Wrocław, Poland

The technologies discussed in the article help us better communicate within as well as outside the company. Most of them have related to working virtually, and the trend of virtual cooperation will be undoubtedly rising. The complexity and uniqueness of our ability to work virtually is not only a desired state but a must in the market. With the technology moving forward, it only makes sense to take advantage of the technologies available to make the work more efficient.

The intercultural dimension is starting to permeate every sphere of business. There is hardly a company which could ignore the intercultural aspect, whether on a local or national level. Companies which decide to explore international markets face multiple challenges of conducting business. For corporations – global players – this challenge reaches the extreme: the diversity of cultures could make it hardly possible to exist, including both the external and the internal domain. The diversity of customers and suppliers is opposed to the diversity of employees working in every nook and cranny of the world. The number of variations in the way people talk, write, greet each other, approach deadlines or simply do business is incredible.

How do companies manage such culturally and geographically diversified workforce? Big organizations need to work effectively regardless of cultural differences

among their employees. Letting each country branch approach business in a different way would mean no benefit of scale; and most frequently it is the economy of scale which big organizations benefit most from.

Most corporations have identified a solution providing them with a relatively stabilized work environment – explicitly defined corporate culture. Standardized corporate culture diminishes diversity in behaviours and sets clear expectations towards each employee. The approach to deadlines and meetings becomes more transparent, and the diversity becomes manageable.

Would this mean that explicit corporate culture kills diversity? In some cases it certainly does – let us consider companies where employees need to dress alike, speak alike, move alike, and probably even – think alike. There is a certain value in a

strong unification, and companies like McDonalds or Coca-Cola have long discovered the benefit. Others are more moderate about the absolute validity of likeness. After all, most companies have diverse products and want to be able to reach diverse customers. These have diverse needs and would expect diverse attitudes, products and services. Most companies are not able to reach all market sectors unless they strongly diversify their portfolio. Some have made diversity their competitive advantage and explicitly incorporated it into their corporate culture. Global players like Hewlett-Packard welcome diversity at all levels of the organization, starting from suppliers and partners, through the thousands of employees worldwide, to customers and products. The corporate culture aims then not to standardize, but to build an inclusive environment that supports the employees and enables them to do their best work inside and outside the company.

One of the specifics of working for a global player is its international dimension. It frequently happens that teams are built where people are scattered around the globe. How can their members effectively cooperate over the barriers of culture and space? What about teams whose members will never meet each other face to face? Would effective cooperation be possible at all?

This cooperation depends heavily on effective communication. What the company can offer to support cooperation in international teams are two measures: on the one hand, corporate culture supporting cooperative spirit and valuing diversity of backgrounds and perspectives; on the oth-

er, tools and solutions enabling free information exchange. Many companies recognize the challenges faced by virtual teams and offer tools and resources to support the virtual workforce and help virtual teams to be high performing teams. In an environment where speed is of the essence and it is very likely that project team members may never meet in person, it is essential that the employees are properly equipped to use tools to enable collaboration regardless of physical location.

In the following part of the paper we will present an overview of tools and solutions which enhance and improve – or in some cases even enable – communication in business. We have classified them into groups depending on the level of interactivity which they support: those allowing little interactivity, virtual interactions, enabling conversations, or even supporting face-to-face gatherings.

1. Internet-based solutions

It is hardly imaginable for an international company to exist and work without being connected to the **Internet**. The Internet was created within and for the U.S. army, however, global players realized quickly that this is one of the best means of advertising, communicating and interacting with the external world. This real revolution gave them the possibility to penetrate any potential customer sector regardless of time zones or geographical limits. Some companies use interactive Internet-based solutions for letting their customers express opinions or contact the company directly. Company websites have also become a standard means for publishing open job

positions and so – trying to attract potential employees. This solution allows global players to find skilled workforce interested in working for the company as well as to limit the cost of recruitment as much as possible. In the very competitive and continuously changing environment of rapidly appearing lucrative contracts or new sites opening at an instance, the Internet-based recruitment system offers the quickest and most efficient way to find new employees.

However, corporations use the Internet logic in much more ways than just for external communication. In the same way as with the clients, companies interact with their employees using private computer networks – **intranets**. Their role is to support and promote the corporate culture, share the latest news on products and services or sales results as well as to allow effective horizontal and vertical communication. The intranet is often used as a platform which links all tools designed and intended for letting employees perform their daily work: global directory, room or travel booking systems, specific tools for finance, HR, or staffing departments. Very often employees can change their personal address or update their profile via an Intranet-based interface themselves, without involving the HR department, which results in considerable savings of working time. The self-service solutions include intranet knowledge databases, FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) on various topics, and for the desperate – the possibility to submit an online inquiry relating to IT, HR, system deficiencies, or any other issue.

Other devices which enable international communication are **shared common**

spaces in the form of shared drives or share-points. These are virtual workplaces with the possibility to limit the number of users. In most cases they are created for the duration of a project or – for a longer period – to support specific needs of an existing team. The advantage of a limited number of users is security of data: before the project is finished, nobody else apart from the team members can access the information. Used mostly for storing common documents, manuals or training materials, shared common spaces allow employees to use the same, updated versions of a document and to have access to the same data. Appropriate use of a shared disk space can also depend on the project – either each person can have the possibility to change the existing document and upload new files onto the share or the editor rights are limited to one person only, which eliminates the risk of losing important data or publishing obsolete information. Of course if required, all members can receive a read&write access.

The Internet, however, is used not only for storing data. One of the major tools used by companies is personal information manager including **e-mail applications**. It is hard to believe that at its early days access to electronic mail was restricted only to few people in top positions. Nowadays, personal e-mail account is one of the first ‘assets’ given to a new employee who starts within a company. It allows employees to be in contact with other team members and a nearly instantaneous exchange of ideas also with those who live on the other side of the globe. Presentations, spreadsheets or audio materials can be sent via e-mail as

attachments. People working on a project in the same role can use generic mailboxes, i.e. one mailbox available for multiple users. They all can send e-mails from the common address. It eliminates the risk of not reacting to an incoming mail when one member of the team is absent or unavailable – another member of the group can do it on his or her behalf.

Apart from e-mail, the personal information manager can include a **corporate address book** covering all employees in the organization as well as a **synchronized calendar** which enables other employees to find a suitable time slot for everybody to set up a meeting.

2. Real time communication

Although the use of e-mail is an asset in information exchange, some issues need to be discussed in an instant. Therefore, companies provide their employees with tools for **instant messaging** to enhance communication in a real time. These Internet-based solutions are the closest to oral communication and used frequently in a more informal context. Thanks to the presence indicator, co-workers know whether a colleague is available and whether they can expect to be answered quickly. It does not limit communication flow to two people only: communication can take place among a few users simultaneously (group chat option). Moreover, instant messaging allows employees with hearing deficiency to communicate in real time with their colleagues. However, due to poor security the use of instant messaging solutions, which are popular and available to most Internet

users such as MSN messenger or Skype, is often forbidden in large business organizations. The software more trusted by corporations includes Lotus SameTime¹ or Jabber².

A picture is worth a thousand words. What could be even more valuable, would be to have somebody explain the picture to us, pointing out to its sections and providing us with an appropriate comment – especially if the picture contains specific information like a chart, a table, or a process map. This can be a child's play in face-to-face meetings – but how to enable visual communication in a virtual setting? The most basic option would be to connect by phone and to watch the same file on each computer separately, trying to imagine which section of the graphics the other person means. It is much easier, though, to be able to watch the other person's desktop – live. In the market there are a few solutions making that possible; let us mention **NetMeeting** as one of the most popular means of such communication. This Microsoft product³ is a standard component of Windows and is frequently used in corporate internal communication. Most companies with a higher security standard allow NetMeeting exchange only inside or only outside the company LAN, maintaining a firewall in between. NetMeeting features include application sharing, whiteboard, file transfer, text chat, peer-to-peer PC video, and per instance

¹ IBM Enterprise Instant Messaging and Web Conferencing – www.ibm.com/lotus/sametime 2007-10-29.

² Jabber – <http://www.jabber.org/> 2007-10-29.

³ netmeeting – www.microsoft.com/windows/NetMeeting/default.ASP 2007-11-01.

event room. This tool is recommended for groups of up to 6–8 participants – the participant with the slowest network connection affects the performance of all others, and as a result the speed of the painting is only as fast as the slowest connection. The NetMeeting can be used not only for making team meetings more effective – it is also very useful in case of an IT issue: an IT specialist can then get connected with any employee and perform the necessary actions remotely, yet directly in the affected computer.

For groups larger than 8 participants, another solution would be of a better use. **Virtual Rooms**, a product of Hewlett-Packard⁴, offer the capacity of up to 250 participants. Set up in a different way than NetMeeting, VR performance is dependent on the network infrastructure and local performance in each participant's own environment. Participants do not influence each other. Apart from meetings and team work, VRs are used for presentations and trainings. The functionalities of VRs include the same as NetMeeting plus raise hand, web tour, written questions (can be anonymous), and survey (polling). What's important, VRs allow multiple presenters to be active simultaneously, which is also an advantage in comparison to NetMeeting where only one host at a time is possible. HP even offers the possibility to record the sessions – of course, the additional service is additionally charged. The benefit is the possibility to store the recorded material for the use of future 'generations' of em-

ployees joining a specific department or even to make it available for all company employees in the form of an audio-video broadcast.

Internet-based solutions have considerably changed the way we conduct business and communicate with each other. Thanks to tools like internal networks, common spaces, electronic mail and instant messengers, team members can cooperate with each other regardless of the border lines and time zones. They can even communicate in real time using a broad range of solutions, starting from instant messengers up to virtual rooms.

They can also just grab a phone and talk.

3. Solutions for oral communication

Although the Internet allows employees to communicate faster and with an increased efficiency, this is still definitely not enough. Increasing e-mail traffic, presentations and web-published news will never beat a voice message. That is why companies provide employees with audio, i.e. phone solutions. They can be used independently from those Internet-based, however, more frequently they are used in a combined mode. The choice of the most suitable solution is determined mostly by the number of participants present in the event.

The simplest way to use a **phone** is to have two people in different locations connect and exchange their opinions on any valid subject. What if there are a few who would like to take part in the discussion? Many of the office phones have a **conferencing feature**, enabling to connect a few users to one phone line – for most mobiles

⁴ HP Virtual Rooms for Online Meetings, Training, and Webconferencing – <http://h10076.www1.hp.com/education/hpvtr/2007-11-01>.

it's three users, and for Cisco IP Phones it can be as much as eight people simultaneously connected to the same line⁵.

For even more users, a **teleconference** would be of an advantage. Teleconference can be purchased case by case, as the need arises⁶. However, in global organizations the need is constantly high, and employees are involved daily in interactions with large groups on the phone. Therefore, most corporations maintain a system of phone bridges enabling their employees to organize conference calls. Even though creating considerable cost to the company, this means of communication is a must in a global setting, especially in transregional project teams.

A more cost-effective option would be to use one of the free downloadable communicators like Skype. The clear gain in terms of cost could probably be counterbalanced by the clear risk of confidential data leaking out of the company. Skype-like solutions are therefore both attractive – and risky.

When discussing the Skype, it is good to know that Skype 2.0 and upgrades feature also **videoconferencing**. A simple webcam attached to the screen could create a feeling for the other person's look, mood, or body language. Nevertheless, video-based conferences have not become a standard, and the main obstacles are mentioned as deficient eye-contact and the conscious-

ness of appearance – both sides would like to 'look good' in front of a camera. The self-consciousness will probably disappear with time as such solutions become more widespread, and the eye contact issue is tackled by many providers like HP which created a product named 'Halo studios'⁷. These specially arranged studios create an impression of a face-to-face contact and provide a full-size and life-like image of the interlocutors. Taking into consideration that a two-day business trip means about 81% of working hours are wasted⁸, global companies will surely invest time and money into improving and applying such solutions in the work of their international teams and transregional project groups.

4. Enhancing face-to-face cooperation

Fortunately, even in global companies teams are not always spread around the globe. It might happen that they are based in the same office, in the same region, or at least the team members have the possibility to meet each other face to face with certain frequency. Can and should the organization support such face to face gatherings? The answer is clear. Face-to-face meetings are invaluable.

A very valid point while organizing team meetings is the availability of a meeting room. This can be a major concern in offices organized as open spaces. Arranging a spontaneous gathering around one of the desks would disturb other employees who

⁵ Cisco Unified IP Phones 7900 Series – Cisco Systems – <http://www.cisco.com/en/US/products/hw/phones/ps379/index.html> 2007-11-01.

⁶ A+ Conferencing can help – <http://aplusconferencing.com/> 2007-11-01 or Phone Conferencing - Infinite Conferencing - <http://www.infiniteconferencing.com/phone-conferencing.asp> 2007-11-01.

⁷ Video Collaboration - <http://www.hp.com/halo/> 2007-11-01.

⁸ Video Collaboration - <http://www.hp.com/halo/> 2007-11-01.

do not belong to the team but work in the vicinity. Also, discussions with a customer or another type of an external party should rather be carried out in a convenient and quiet place. The number of meeting rooms is frequently limited, and a good coordination of reservations optimizes the usage of the meeting facilities. Some companies have the bookings arranged by a secretary, but a much more efficient way is a **system for conference room booking**. An example of such a system can be RESS⁹ or OnBoard™ provided by AgilQuest™¹⁰.

In many cases, one can also request audio/visual tools such as overhead projectors and speakerphones to be used in meeting rooms. Some companies would even include a possibility to order catering to a meeting room, if needed. Thanks to such a system in place, any employee can do the booking for their meeting themselves (no need to involve an extra person), and the risk of overlap is avoided. What is more, making a reservation is possible outside of the working hours, while working remotely, or many weeks in advance. A disadvantage of such a system is the risk of excessive booking or lacking cancellation in case a meeting has been postponed, which causes an unnecessary blocking of resources.

⁹ RESS – Room & Event Scheduling Software, <http://www.ress-by-ims.com/> 2007-10-25.

¹⁰ AgilQuest OnBoard, <http://www.agilquest.com/xq/asp/id.99/qx/dynamic.htm> 2007-10-25.

Conclusions

The discussed technologies help us better communicate within as well as outside of the company. Most of them have related to working virtually, and no doubt the trend of virtual cooperation will be rising. The complexity and uniqueness of our ability to work virtually is not only a desired state but a must in the market. In order to drive down costs and to better meet the needs of the customer and the company as a whole, there are several ways to meet virtually retaining quality comparable to face-to-face meetings. With the technology moving forward, it only makes sense to take advantage of the technologies available to make the work more efficient.

Eliminating cultural differences is practically out of question. Most global players do not consider intercultural diversity as an obstacle; on the contrary, they perceive it as an asset. In the market understanding, it creates an appreciable competitive advantage. A positive approach to diversity opens the door to the power of international teams where creativity has the highest potential. In order to make the cooperation possible, they need to communicate efficiently and by proper means. Making use of the potential of diversified teams frequently means that the company first needs to provide its employees with tools which will make it technically possible to cooperate in a global – and usually virtual – setting.

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BENDRADARBIAVIMAS NEPAISANT SKIRTUMŲ – KOMUNIKACIJOS PRIETAISAI TAIKOMI VIRTUALIOJE DARBO APLINKOJE

Ewa Bujak, Monika Chutnik

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje aptariamos technologijos, kurios padeda tinkamai komunikuoti tiek organizacijos viduje, tiek už organizacijos ribų. Daugelis technologijų taikomos darbo aplinkoje (virtualioje darbo vietoje), tačiau neabejotinai technologijų įtaka jaučiama ir analizuojant virtualaus darbo srities tendencijas. Gebėjimas dirbti virtualioje erdvėje ne tik organizacijos vadovų siekiamybė, bet ir rinkos poreikių nulemia-

ma tendencija. Siekdamos mažinti sąnaudas ir geriau atitikti vartotojų poreikius, kompanijos, kaip vienas, turi tinkamai organizuoti susitikimus akis į akį, kurie tampa galimi taikant virtualias komunikacijos priemones. Technologijoms keičiantis, belieka sekti jų kaitą ir naudotis visomis jų teikiamomis galimybėmis, įgalinančiomis dirbti efektyviau.