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VIRTUAL TEAMS AND INTERCULTURAL ETHICS: PREVENTATIVE MEASURES FOR
ETHICAL DILEMMAS

by
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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ethical challenges faced by technical communicators working in global virtual teams. Virtual teams usage are becoming increasingly more popular and diverse. As a result, it is valuable for technical communicators to understand and recognize the challenges that are faced within global virtual teams in order to find solutions and preventive measures for these challenges. The ethical challenges present in global virtual teams were determined by examining the literature on virtual teams and intercultural ethics and conducting a survey of practicing technical communicators who have experience in virtual teams. The purpose of the survey was to determine the ethical challenges that are present for technical communicators and how these issues were resolved. The survey results reveal valuable approaches to resolving and preventing ethical challenges in virtual teams.

This thesis contributes to a better understanding of virtual teams and intercultural ethics and examines the ethical challenges that are faced by technical communicators. Furthermore, the thesis presents preventive measures for addressing ethical challenges. Finally, the thesis also provides suggestions for future research into the ethical challenges that are faced within global virtual teams, particularly those related to cultural differences.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND VIRTUAL TEAMS

Since the 1990s virtual teams have increased because of more global competition, more readily available electronic communication technologies, and the pervasive nature of the Internet (Anawati and Craig 45; Urel and Zhang 363; Shea et al. 301). Virtual teams are those teams that rely on electronic communications and technology to lower costs, complete projects quickly and more effectively, and make better decisions in a timely manner (Duarte and Snyder 4). The electronic communication tools teams use may include phone calls, e-mail, chat, or videoconferencing. Virtual teams are also used because they provide flexible working arrangements with benefits for both employees and employers (Urel and Zhang 363). In 2000, there were over 30 million virtual teams (Ahuja and Galvin 162). As of 2008, there were 33.7 million telecommuters in the US (Ozias 3) and 41.39 million telecommuters across the world (Jones). As of 2011, more than 50 percent of the companies in North America use some form of virtual teams and many of these are Fortune 1000 organizations (Mukherjee et al. 274). Virtual team usage continues to increase as technology continues to advance and the world becomes more globalized. Furthermore, virtual teams are being implemented around the world, and it is essential to define virtual teams and understand why they are used.

This chapter explains the purpose, scope, significance, and organization of the thesis. Then this chapter defines virtual teams and explains the reasons for their increased usage. This chapter also discusses virtual teams and technical communicators by looking at who uses virtual teams, why virtual teams are used, and finally, the challenges of working in global virtual teams.

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ethical challenges that are faced by technical communicators within global virtual teams. A survey of practicing technical communicators was conducted in order to better understand the ethical challenges virtual teams face. Data was obtained through a small survey of technical communicators who have participated in global virtual teams. While the survey data cannot be used to determine trends, the data provided in the survey responses can be used as a basis for better understanding the ethical challenges associated with virtual work and for developing similar surveys with larger sample populations to examine specific challenges and preventive measures. The overall objective of the thesis was to examine the ethical challenges that technical communicators face while working in virtual teams and begin to understand these specific ethical challenges and how to resolve these issues to expand and research in more detail in the future.

Scope

The scope of the survey is limited to technical communicators working within global virtual teams. Participants for the survey conducted during this thesis were technical communicators who were members of the Orlando Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication who responded to a List-Serv message. One participant did e-mail the survey to three colleagues who are all technical communicators, but were not a part of the Orlando Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Most of the participants still live and work in Orlando, Florida, but one is in another state and two in other countries.

The data obtained from this survey focuses on the experiences of technical communicators working within global virtual teams.

Significance

The research conducted in this thesis is significant for technical communicators working in virtual teams. Virtual teams have been steadily increasing since the 1990s when the internet started gaining popularity. Since then, globalization and international communications have further increased promoting an even stronger need for virtual teams to support collaboration and increased business throughout the world. Although virtual teams are increasing in number, the debate continues concerning what ethical challenges exist in a global virtual team and how to overcome those challenges. More specifically, much of the literature on virtual teams only discusses challenges with no specific discussion on solutions and preventive measures. Preventive measures could potentially stop ethical challenges from occurring in a global virtual team and are likely to promote continuous and productive collaboration.

Many technical communicators will be a part of a virtual team at some point in their careers, and it is imperative to know how to communicate effectively with diverse team members. Likewise, to date, very little literature focuses specifically on practicing technical communicators working in global virtual teams. The literature that does exist is either on other disciplines or is on virtual teams in general and thus, this thesis is significant for technical communicators because it provides an understanding of the challenges that are faced and solutions for these ethical challenges. The data from this survey gives a preliminary look at the experiences of technical communicators working within global

virtual teams. While this data set may not be quantifiable or used to determine trends or guidelines, it can provide specific challenges and preventive measures that can be examined comprehensively in the future.

Organization

This thesis is organized into five chapters to discuss virtual teams, intercultural ethics, the survey that was conducted, and conclusions. This chapter serves as the introduction to the thesis and includes the purpose, scope, significance, and organization. The rest of the chapters discuss virtual teams and their application to technical communication. More specifically, global virtual teams are discussed including who uses them, why they are used, and the challenges that are faced.

Chapter Two is a review of literature on intercultural ethics. Chapter Two defines and discusses culture, ethics, and three current approaches to intercultural ethics: absolutism, relativism, and contextual relativism. The chapter ends with a discussion on technical communicators in virtual teams and the role of intercultural ethics in their collaborations.

Chapter Three discusses the ethical challenges that are faced within virtual teams. For example, this chapter examines numerous challenges including cultural differences and language barriers. Chapter Three also discusses the current methods for addressing ethical challenges including training, collaboration skills, eliminating biases, adapting communication, and understanding and adapting cultures.

Chapter Four discusses the survey that was conducted and is divided into two parts. The Methodology section explains the sample selection, survey components, data

collection, use of human research, and analyzing the data. The Discussion of Survey Findings section examines the responses that were given by the survey participants. This section is divided into four subsections based on the survey questions: challenges of working in global virtual teams, methods for overcoming these challenges, possible preventive measures, and advice for individuals working in global virtual teams.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses possible preventive measures for ethical challenges including intercultural training, collaboration tools training, open communication, discussion of culture, and flexibility and understanding. Chapter Five also provides a short list of guidelines for working in global virtual teams. The chapter ends with a discussion of suggestions for future research.

Virtual Teams

Virtual team members may be members of the same organization in different locations (both within the country and throughout the world) or members of different organizations located across the globe (Berry 187). In the US, more corporations are using multicultural virtual teams with team members from around the world. More specifically, nearly two-thirds of US companies use some form of virtual teams (Bergiel, Bergiel, and Balsmeier 428) and about half of working professionals currently participate or have participated in a virtual team (Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 434). These teams may contain anywhere from two or three members to twenty or thirty members.

Virtual teams, by nature, communicate across time zones and locations using electronic technologies (Duarte and Snyder 4) and will rarely, if ever, communicate face-to-face (Neece 283). Moreover, virtual teams can employ expert individuals as location is no

longer a barrier (Webster and Wong 42). One important aspect of a virtual team is the reliance on electronic communication tools.

All businesses use some form of virtual communication to connect team members in the same building or across the world (Flammia, Cleary, and Slattery 89; Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 435). Both co-located teams and distributed teams can use virtual communication tools to their advantage (Webster and Wong 41) for specialized projects, global initiatives, and for expanding business markets. Most organizations use at least the phone and e-mail to communicate and even these tools are considered electronic and virtual (Sivunen and Valo 59). In many instances, it is easier and most convenient to call or e-mail a team member, even when working in the same building. Moreover, because virtual teams are dispersed, team members rarely if ever, meet in person (Berry 188) and only know their teammates based on text or audio communications and possibly see them in a videoconference. The budget of a company to purchase and update collaboration technologies will determine the technology limitations for these communication tools.

Application to Technical Communication

Due to the increased usage of virtual teams, the majority of technical communicators will work in a virtual team at some point in their careers (Flammia, Cleary, and Slattery 91). Technical communicators must know how to communicate with individuals from other cultures and across time zones (Paretti, McNair, and Holloway-Attaway 348). Intercultural communication, particularly in virtual teams, is important for technical communicators because communication needs to be clear and precise to be understood. More specifically, working in virtual teams requires not only a technical

knowledge of the collaboration tools, but the ability to communicate effectively across cultures (Roy 58; Herrington 517).

These abilities are vital to a technical communicator's face-to-face interactions and can easily be transferred to virtual work as well. Likewise, individuals from multiple disciplines have to find a way to work together in virtual teams (Robey, Powers, and Khoo 51; Rutkowski et al. 302). According to Connaughton and Shuffler, numerous articles exist for "communication, management, psychology, and other disciplines" on collaboration in global virtual teams (388). For example, Johnston and Rosin were part of an ethnographic study of a virtual team composed of "systems support and database administrators" with members in three separate countries (2). This is just one example of a multidisciplinary virtual team, but many workplace teams are composed of members from multiple disciplines. Additionally, virtual teams complete numerous tasks including writing software documentation, proposals, reports, and memos (Rutkowski et al. 222; Grosse 27; Ahuja and Galvin 164) and technical communicators are trained in these protocols. Technical communicators are consistently a part of virtual teams because not only do they have the ability to write reports and other documentation well, but they have extensive technical knowledge and are proficient and effective communicators. Due to an increase in using virtual teams in the technical communication field, learning how to best operate within these teams is essential for new and current technical communicators who desire to create effective collaborations across the country and the across the globe.

Who Uses Virtual Teams

Most organizations have some reliance on electronic communication technologies and virtual teams to achieve a final product and promote a continuous productivity cycle. Virtual teams can be used for “research and development, customer support, software development, and product design” (Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 434) as well as “multinational product launches, negotiating mergers and acquisitions among global companies and managing strategic alliances” (Pauleen and Yoong 205). Similarly, some organizations have project development virtual teams in charge of working with a client to create a new product or way of completing a task (Duarte and Snyder 7). Virtual teams can be used for a wide range of tasks and projects that can easily take place across the world. Business relationships across time zones enable the use of virtual teams where team members may occasionally meet face-to-face, but the majority of communication can be conducted through the use of various technologies.

Any field can use virtual teams and many organizations have virtual teams with members from multiple disciplines. Across disciplines, virtual team work appears to be increasing. For example, Aon Consulting conducts surveys of US employers to observe their available benefits and talent management strategies. In 2009, according to the Benefits and Talents Survey nearly all of the respondents were either increasing the number of virtual teams being used or were maintaining their usage (Leonard 42). For technical communicators in particular, virtual team work may involve writing documentation, document design, and even some web design. For instance, team members can work on sections of a report simultaneously and combine them together at a later date.

Why Virtual Teams are Used

Virtual teams are becoming increasingly popular as they not only save money in terms of traveling and relocating costs, but they also allow for a continuous 24-hour work day spanning across time zones as compared to a limited nine-to-five workday in one specific geographic region and time zone. Similarly, virtual teams also allow for multiple perspectives for a problem or issue (Hardin, Fuller, and Davidson 131). Moreover, virtual teams also allow for different opinions whether from multiple disciplines, different corporate divisions, or different cultures. Virtual team members are likely to have different perspectives on key issues and are likely to be more honest with their opinions in an online medium (Bhappu, Zellmer-Bruhn, and Anand 156; Bhappu, Zellmer-Bruhn, and Anand 160). More specifically, virtual teams have the possibility to perform better because of cultural diversity (Hardin, Fuller, and Davison 131). Teams composed of culturally diverse members are likely to have different perspectives, resources, and technical knowledge and might find a solution that a homogenous group would not have found (Grosse 32). Virtual teamwork provides many benefits to individual team members and to the organizations employing virtual structures. However, there are also many challenges associated with virtual work. Many of these challenges are discussed in detail throughout the literature on virtual teams.

Challenges of Working in Global Virtual Teams

Several challenges and limitations typically occur while working in virtual teams. For example, one challenge of working in virtual teams is the lack of communication skills

and the lack of collaboration skills for communicating effectively. While most team members are used to working in a group setting, many are not used to relying on virtual communication technologies for all primary communication. In these instances, team members do not speak to each other as often as they should or messages are not as explicit as they should be for the medium. Moreover, global virtual teams are composed of diverse team members with very different values, beliefs, and behaviors. Difficulty arises for some individuals to respectfully communicate across cultures and to understand these differences. These challenges with communication and collaboration are discussed more in depth in Chapter 3, but are important for virtual team members to understand that challenges will be present. Additionally, understanding how teams work together, managing skills designed for co-located multicultural teams, and an understanding of the collaboration and communication technology tools is essential for virtual team work (Duarte and Snyder 4). Similarly, know effective conflict management solutions and learn to work together through an online medium (Horvath and Tobin 251). Furthermore, having the skills to compromise and negotiate, handle conflict solution appropriately, and include new team members as a part of the group are all essential skills in virtual teams (Staples, Wong, and Cameron 178). While it is possible to work in a virtual team without these skills, a lack of good communication skills can cause challenges and disputes within a virtual team. Conflict is difficult to resolve in virtual teams (Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 434-435). For example, as with any group setting, virtual teams are composed of team members with different cultural backgrounds and personalities which can contribute to differences of opinion and disagreements (Anawati and Craig 45; Berry 197; Kayworth

and Leidner 187). Likewise, cultures have unique ways of communicating and these differences may also lead to conflict (Sadri and Condia 24). Conflict solution skills are vital for virtual team members to not only understand the cause of the dispute, but to find ways to mitigate it (Grosse 35; Shea et al. 302). Conflict and disagreements in virtual teams may have many causes including cultural differences.

Recognize cultural differences and conflict, while using communication skills to overcome these challenges. For instance, culture has an impact on social presence preferences. Social presence is defined as “the degree to which a medium facilitates awareness of the other person and interpersonal relationships during interaction” (Yen and Tu 237; Zhang et al. 62; Roberts, Lowry, and Sweeney 31). Additionally, presence is an individual’s ability to perceive others during virtual communication (Kerhwald 91; Oztok and Brett 2; Lowry et al. 633; Krish, Maros, and Stapa 202). Social presence can also include an individual’s view of the medium being used to communicate (Oztok and Brett 2). From the definition of social presence, face-to-face interaction would have the most presence as individuals are communicating with speech, body language, facial expressions, and situational cues (Zhang et al. 62; Roberts, Lowry, and Sweeney 31; Lowry et al. 638). Many people agree that face-to-face communication is high presence; however, whether electronic communication is high or low presence is still under debate (Roberts, Lowry, and Sweeney 32). More specifically, there is the question of whether electronic and virtual communication is low-presence or high-presence as there is evidence for both views. Much of the research suggests that traditional virtual communication is low in social presence as there is physical and mental distance between team members and limited social cues

(Zhang et al. 62; Roberts, Lowry, and Sweeney 31; Lowry et al. 638). Lowry et al. state that current electronic communication methods are higher in social presence than in the past (Lowry et al. 639). For example, communication tools that allow more social and visual cues, such as audio or video conferences, are high presence as individuals feel more connected both visually and in discussion as compared to text-based communications that are low presence (Yen and Tu 236; Zhang et al. 64). Understand the differences between high presence and low presence technologies because certain team members may prefer certain tools.

Whether a communication technology is considered high presence or low presence is dependent on whether it is a rich media or lean media. The media richness theory examines the “communication capabilities based upon the degree of communication task” (Kwak 485). More specifically, the media richness theory supposes that different communication methods will vary “in the ability to facilitate changes in understanding among communicators” (Kahai and Cooper 264; Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 577). This theory can be used to look at communication mediums and examine whether they are rich media or lean media. According to the theory, the leaner the medium the less immediate response, situational cues, and background context is needed or present (Kwak 487; Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 577). Lean mediums include e-mail or instant message chat that relies solely on text-based communication. On the other hand, a richer medium would be face-to-face communication because communication is easier because as Kahai and Cooper explain, it “enables immediate feedback and the conveyance of cues such as facial expressions” (264; Dennis, Fuller, and Valavich 577; Kwak 487). In general, media richness

is determined by “the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and senses involved, personalization, and language variety” (Rice 477).

Media richness is connected to social presence because leaner mediums are typically lower in social presence and richer mediums are usually higher in social presence. For example, face-to-face communication is considered high presence because there are situational cues and people feel connected while talking. It is similar with a videoconference as there are audio, visual, and body language cues that are present during conversation. Face-to-face communication is both high presence and a rich medium because there is immediate response and visual cues (Kahai and Cooper 264). Similarly, low presence communications tend to be text-based communication where there is no background context and the message is explicitly stated. These communications are also lean mediums because they are asynchronous with little to no immediate feedback and no situational cues present (Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 577). In either case, understand the differences between high- and low- presence communications because some individuals prefer one over the other and there are benefits and challenges to both.

Some individuals would prefer a low presence communication method such as e-mail or instant message. In this case, low presence prevents the bias that can appear in high presence situations, but communication with less presence needs to be more detailed and explicit to be understood. Furthermore, low presence communication may provide fewer opportunities to share opinions and less group unity because physical and social distance persists, but it also supports equality between team members while limiting dominant personalities (Roberts 31; Zhang et al. 62). In contrast, high presence communication tools

may lead to confrontation and social pressure for team members (Zhang et al. 62). Due to personal or cultural reasons, different team members may prefer high presence or low presence communication. Individuals who need and appreciate more visual and situational cues would prefer high presence communication, either face-to-face if possible or videoconferences at the least, compared to someone who does better with just the message and would prefer low presence. The idea of social presence is connected with the notion of high-context and low-context cultures which is discussed in depth in Chapter 3. These cultural differences and technology preferences are important for team identity and team dynamics.

Cultural differences are also a challenge in virtual teams where there is the lack of cues that remind team members of their diversity and differences (Mansour-Cole 52). Since a virtual team relies on technology to communicate, team members can seem very distant from one another both physically and emotionally. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to remember and appreciate cultural differences. For example, in a face-to-face meeting it is easier to see and understand that a team member is uncomfortable with direct conflict based on facial expressions and body language as compared to a virtual meeting where visual cues are not present. In many cases, team diversity is beneficial for collaboration, but is sometimes difficult to remember while working virtually. Likewise, cultures have different acceptable practices such as business relationships versus intimacy or gender inequality (Dubé and Paré, "Multifaceted Nature" 18). For instance, some cultures prefer getting to know the people they are working with, while others are very transactional and task focused. Other cultures are supportive of women in the workplace and in leadership

roles, while others view a women's place in the home. These differences may not seem important upon first glance but can be the cause of disagreements, disputes, and conflicts when team members do not act in a way that seems acceptable and correct to the rest of the team. Each culture has a particular set of behaviors, practices, and norms that are acceptable within that society that may or may not be the same for other cultures (Dubé and Paré, "Multifaceted Nature" 18). These differences may not seem important, but can be the cause of disagreements, disputes, and conflicts when team members do not act in a way that seems acceptable and correct to the rest of the team. Different cultures can also mean different languages that are spoken. Different languages and different accents may contribute to miscommunication and misunderstanding. A lack of trust may also impact communication.

Developing Trust

Trust is discussed throughout virtual team literature because it is necessary in group collaborations, but is hard to foster in an online environment. Trust is one of the most critical aspects of a virtual team (Jones, Oyung, and Pace 27; Gibson and Manuel 61; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 30). Although trust is so important in a virtual team, it is hard to develop via electronic communication according to the literature on the topic (Black and Edwards 136; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 30).

Connaughton and Daly assert that unresponsiveness and miscommunication in a virtual team can contribute to a lack of trust (120). More specifically, if an individual does not respond right away to an e-mail there is the notion that he or she is uninterested and unreliable. Similarly, miscommunication in a virtual team takes longer to work through in

an online environment as compared to face-to-face meetings. Conflict in a virtual team may be caused by technological delays, biases, lack of trust, and lack of empathy and is also more difficult to resolve and control (Urel and Zhang 366; Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 435). In a virtual team, sharing information in a timely manner is challenging. Delays in communication also contributes to difficulty with conflict solution because either team members are not able to discuss the issue at the same time or team members are not able to see situational cues and body language to better understand teammates (Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison 435). In these instances, it is not uncommon for team members to harbor resentment or annoyance due to a communication issue and be less willing to trust their teammates. Likewise, trust is hard to build in an online environment because team members do not feel that they know each other as well as they would in a face-to-face relationship (Murphy 320). Similarly, trust is harder to develop because the lack of visual cues and nonverbal communication that is present in a face-to-face communication (Dubé and Paré, "Global Virtual" 72). It is easier, in most cases, to build trust with an individual while talking in person as there is eye contact and visible interest. Similarly, Kayworth and Leidner assert that cultural differences can intensify problems and hinder trust due to differences in urgency or timing from one culture to another (187). According to Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner, low trust virtual teams exhibit a lack of communication, lack of interest, and minimal talk and responsibilities (49-50). Conversely, a high trust team exhibits goals, more in-depth discussion, positive attitudes, interest, and maintains responsibilities well (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 43-45). Two kinds of trust that can develop in a virtual team and there are many ways to promote trust.

Two main types of trust can appear in a virtual team: mutual trust and swift trust. Mutual trust is identical to a face-to-face relationship where there is a level of uncertainty and risk, but individuals accept vulnerability, share their ideas, and have faith in the group (Horvath and Tobin 252; Gibson and Manuel 59; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 31). Mutual trust is also based in the ideas of benevolence, ability, and integrity (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 31). More specifically, mutual trust is based believing that a team member is competent, dependable, reliable, and cares about the success of the team (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 31). For mutual trust to develop a team member has to prove his/her ability and that he/she has good intentions. This kind of trust is the basis of having a good feeling about someone and believing that they are genuine and honest with their words and actions. Mutual trust takes longer to develop as the team has to feel comfortable with the rest of the team and understand nuances and behaviors. Swift trust happens early on in the team development and develops when team members feel valued and respected (Horvath and Tobin 252). Swift trust can be easily developed by a newly formed team. This kind of trust allows the team to start working on tasks and collaborating without waiting for mutual trust to develop. Swift trust is temporary and can either dissolve once the team accomplishes a task or can eventually turn into mutual trust as team members get to know each other better. Certain techniques are beneficial for promoting both mutual and swift trust within a team.

In order to promote trust in a virtual team, there needs to be open and free communication and team members should remain supportive of the team and be active listeners (Gibson and Manuel 72). Similarity in language and culture also helps promote

trust in a virtual team; although, similarity between teammates is not always possible in a global virtual team (Urel and Zhang 365). If trust can be established in a virtual team, either from the onset or shortly thereafter, there is a greater chance of success, cooperation, confidence, and better communication throughout the life of the virtual team (Jones, Oyung, and Pace 27; Gibson and Manuel 61). Although trust is difficult to establish in a virtual environment, teams can benefit from increased levels of trust. A lack of intercultural communication training also is challenging in a virtual team because no prescribed method exists for developing working intercultural relationships.

Global teams are composed of members who have numerous differences including language, work habits, and cultural views. Training in intercultural communication is one way for team members to overcome language barriers and differences in values and norms to create success (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 108). As Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen assert, understanding other cultures and being sensitive to differences is invaluable (103).

Cultural training is likely to highlight differences that team members may not previously have thought of and provides ways to form relationships and improve communication.

Virtual team relationships can also be improved when team members understand their personal biases towards members of other cultures (Duarte and Snyder 67). Many individuals, either consciously or subconsciously, have biases towards other individuals and these biases impact behaviors, actions, and ways of speaking. Within virtual teams, people have to find a way to understand other cultures and overcome their biases to promote successful collaboration. The knowledge of cultural differences is established through better understanding intercultural ethics, which promotes respectful

communication between individuals and groups (Evanoff 453). Once an understanding of respectful communication and intercultural ethics is established, then it is easier to recognize challenges within global virtual teams and find polite ways to address these challenges and find solutions.

Conclusion

This chapter first discussed the purpose, scope, significance, and organization of the thesis. The chapter then defined virtual teams and discussed their relevance to technical communication by examining who uses virtual teams, why are they used, and the challenges that are faced within global virtual teams. Since virtual teams usage is increasing both for the technical communication field and in general, understanding the challenges of working with individuals from other cultures proves important. Individuals have their own preferences for collaborations tools, different cultural backgrounds, and ways to establish trust which can hinder virtual team effectiveness if not properly understood. By understanding how virtual teams work and the role of intercultural ethics on virtual teams, it is easier to understand and examine the ethical challenges that are faced by technical communicators in global virtual teams.

CHAPTER TWO: INTERCULTURAL ETHICS LITERATURE REVIEW

Global virtual team usage is increasing, which intensifies the need to better understand intercultural communication. More specifically, there is a need to recognize how to communicate ethically and respectfully across cultures. Teams are coming together with members from countries all over the world, and as a result, most intercultural teams are composed of team members with varying cultural beliefs and business practices (Deifelt 117). The challenge, then, becomes how to recognize differences among team members and use these differences to celebrate diversity and maintain team effectiveness. Intercultural ethics provides methods and approaches for not only understanding the differences among individuals and cultures, but also for communicating across cultures. Ethics is “a system of moral principles” (“Ethics,” def. 1) and is “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation” (“Ethic,” def. 1). Ethics also helps to dictate what behavior and actions are acceptable within a society. When an individual feels that others accept his/her values, beliefs, and morals, he/she tends to feel respected and is likely to be more honest in communication. Since ethics plays such a vital role in communication, the study of intercultural ethics is important for not only the study of virtual teams, but for practitioners in the technical communication field. By understanding the role of ethics in technical communication, the application of ethics to culture is better understood. The chapter first defines culture and ethics. Then, three approaches to intercultural ethics are discussed: absolutism, relativism, and contextual relativism. Once an understanding of culture and ethics has been established, the chapter discusses how to

ethically communicate across cultures within a virtual team to facilitate respect and effectiveness.

Culture

Culture in its simplest form is “a code or system of values, meanings, premises, images of the ideal and so forth” (Casmir, “International Communication” 12). Culture can be thought as communal norms, values, beliefs, definitions, and attitudes (Jahoda 295). These beliefs and acceptable behaviors are learned from the social environment (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 6). Culture is also developed as people share an identity and memories (Casmir, “International Communication” 15; Jahoda 297). Furthermore, identity is rooted from living in certain areas and sharing similar interests (Casmir, “International Communication” 15; Jahoda 297). For example, US culture is very interested in sports and puts a lot of attention on football and baseball. In other cultures, including many European cultures, soccer is the most popular sport; people frequently attend matches and discuss the sport. Similarly, many Hispanic cultures have a siesta in the middle of the day when people return home for lunch and rest before returning to work or school. The siesta is an accepted practice in Hispanic cultures, but is not a part of the US culture as people in the US are more focused on being busy and getting tasks accomplished. Culture is collective and the basis of society. In essence, culture is the national or regional beliefs and behaviors that are supported by society.

For the purposes of this thesis, culture refers to national cultures; however, cultural groups do exist independent of particular countries. Culture is defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (“Culture,” def.

5b). More specifically, culture is “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization,” (“Culture,” def. 5c) which could also mean a particular country or nation. Culture is always changing as people from different cultures meet and form relationships (Cleveland 428). National cultures develop as the result of the history, geography, and laws that are present within a country; the national culture influences people’s morals and values (Markel 174). For instance, if a society has a law against bribery then an individual is likely to find bribery unethical in most circumstances. The morals and values held within cultures are also dependent on how society views race, gender, and religion (Markel 174). How a society views important issues may also impact how tolerant a society is. For example, if a culture has gender or racial inequality, then these beliefs tend to be promoted within the society. Charles researched the role of culture on “class, racial/ethnic, and gender inequality since the middle of the twentieth century” (41). In her research, Charles found that inequality is “perpetuated across generations and individual lifetimes” (48). As racial or gender inequality exists within a society, elders can teach these beliefs to further generations and the cycle continues. For instance, many Islamic women wear a headscarf. Saharso found that one justification for this cultural norm is gender inequality (10). Wearing a headscarf has been a part of the Islamic culture since the Qur’an was written and the members of the culture continue to teach the importance of the behavior. Although Western women view gender inequality as unjustifiable in any circumstance, Eastern women are more likely to accept gender inequality (Kinias and Kim 91).

Ethics

Ethics is defined as assessing morals, values, and behaviors as right or wrong within a particular situation (Dombrowski 1) and are “the principles of conduct governing an individual or group” (“Ethic,” def. 2b). Ethics also deals “with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation” (“Ethic,” def. 1). Ethical decisions are made by “setting and maintaining standards that reflect moral judgment” by determining right or wrong actions “in a situation between individuals” (Molofsky 52; Nergiz, Kozak, and Balta 86). Ethics deals primarily with what people in a culture to believe to be “good” and “bad” behaviors and the impact of these behaviors and opinions on both members of the culture and members of other cultures. Ethics is typically discussed within a specific culture, but when cultures interact there needs to be a way to determine whether behaviors, actions, and thoughts are acceptable across cultures.

People will interact with individuals from other cultures, and cultures are constantly mixing and changing (Cacciatore 23). Ethical decisions have to be made while keeping cultural differences in mind. Intercultural ethics provides a way to judge whether behaviors and actions are right or wrong across cultural lines. Intercultural ethics promotes “intercultural communicative competence” (Yu 168) which is the ability “to perform effectively and appropriately with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini 1). Furthermore, intercultural communication competence promotes “action and engagement in specific issues of human development” when interacting with diverse individuals (Phipps 12). In this case, intercultural ethics allows for respectfully and honestly communicating ideas across cultures. Numerous articles and

books are available on intercultural ethics and how to respectfully communicate with individuals from other cultures, how to handle conflict, and how to balance learning about other cultures with the beliefs of one's own culture.

Intercultural ethics is the focus of this thesis because honest and forthright communication (Markel 12) is one important aspect of intercultural communication. Moreover, intercultural ethics finds a way "to help people successfully interact with both each other and with the world" (Evanoff 453). Carbo and Smith assert that principles need to be established for intercultural communication that promotes courtesy "with regard to individual and social communication" (1111). Since communication between cultures is so persistent in everyday life, understanding why cultures act, think, and behave the way they do while accepting and recognizing diversity between cultures as beneficial and important is vital (Himma 102). Respectful communication between cultures while striving to understand thoughts, behaviors, morals, and values is the key definition of ethics that will be used throughout the thesis. In general, the center of ethics is really "the impact of behavior on human beings – their happiness, their feelings and thoughts, their personal and social relations" (Shuter 444). People interact and have different emotions, thoughts, and feelings that are expressed through communication. In such a globalized world, communicating ethically across cultures is extremely valuable for better relationships and continued success in business.

While the study of ethics is expansive, ethical approaches for judging whether actions, behaviors, and speech are right or wrong can be limited in by understanding Confucian ethics and Aristotelian ethics. Similarly, there are three main ethical approaches

for communication between individuals: absolutism, relativism, and contextual relativism. These approaches can be applied to intercultural communication to better understand the differences between cultures and to make the appropriate decisions for whether an action, behavior, or statement is right or wrong.

Two useful ethical approaches are available for interacting with individuals from other cultures: Confucian ethics and Aristotle's ethics. Confucian ethics supposes that the base of ethics is in relationships and it is most important to maintain group harmony before promoting individual needs (Dombrowski 65). Confucian ethics relies on four principles:

- people are unequal in relationships
- family is the basis of society
- knowledge is to be gained while saving money and being reliable
- others are to be treated as one would like to be treated (Jingjit and Fotaki 63).

Confucian ethics relies on the notion that by promoting the group and being respectful of other individuals, morality is achieved. Confucian ethics also recognizes that the individual is part of society which is why interactions and relationships are so vital (Jingjit and Fotaki 63).

Aristotle, in contrast, focused more on communication and less on relationships. Aristotle believed that good and right will always prevail in the course of action and discussion (Dombrowski 19). Aristotle saw every behavior, discussion, and action as "aiming at a good" where there are many ways to reach a goal, but that people should have the best intentions to help other people and be honest and genuine while accomplishing a

task (Küçükuysal and Beyhan 45). If people have the best intentions possible and in essence, a good character, then the truth will always prevail.

The views of both Confucius and Aristotle are important for the discussion of ethics because each view is a distinct way of looking at communication between individuals and how honest and genuine communication and relationships are formed. Recognize and understand the views of these ethicists to understand that there are different ways to promote honest, respectful, and ethical communication. However, both ethical theorists have limitations within their theories. Neither ethicist gave a precise way to make judgments on ethical decisions. Confucius believed that morality is achieved through relationships and promoting the group, but instances may arise where an individual struggles with a decision that he/she believes is wrong, but does not want to upset group harmony. Similarly, Aristotle believed that all behaviors aim for the good and the right. However, not every individual behaves with the right intentions for being honest and open and Aristotle did not explain the role of intentions. In any situation, there needs to be an appropriate way to make judgments on whether actions are right or wrong and whether or not to take any action which is done through three current ethical approaches.

Current Ethical Approaches

The current ethical approaches allow for examining behaviors, actions, and communication to judge if they are ethical or not. The culture and the context determine whether an act is ethical or unethical and each ethical approach examines ethics in a different manner. Understand the three ethical approaches as decisions are made for handling ethical conflict appropriately. Technical communicators have to make numerous

ethical decisions including whether or not to include information within a report that may harm the reputation of the company, but is important for consumer safety. In any ethical dilemma, it is essential to communicate both respectfully and honestly. Likewise, many of these decisions involve individuals from other cultures where the issue becomes handling an ethical challenge in a way that is respectful, yet still honest. In finding a way to judge ethical situations one of three ethical approaches can be used: absolutism, relativism, or contextual relativism.

Absolutism

Absolutism limits the importance of cultural differences and views ethics as universal. This approach applies one standard across all cultural bounds and cultural differences are no longer important (Sadri and Flammia 285). Moreover, absolutism is the belief that ethical principles and moral decisions are always absolute and unchanging in any circumstance (Piroozvand and Nassiri 593; Shaoping 433). Absolutism means that moral principles do not change over time. According to Evanoff, absolutism is the belief that a set of rules or principles can “hold true for all persons, in all places, and at all times, regardless of any real differences that may obtain between individuals, cultures, or historical periods” (441). Absolutism limits the significance of cultural differences and suggests that there are at least some universal principles that be applied across cultures.

Absolutism also pertains to universal human rights, rules, and virtues that govern good behavior and keep people safe (Ross 381; Shaoping 437; Howard 318). For instance, people have the right to be treated with respect, the right to live, and the right to not be harmed or degraded if at all possible. These human rights tend to be applicable across most

cultures (Evanoff 442). Finally, absolutism gives humanity a set of standards for ethical decisions that can be used to determine the morality of a belief or action (Shaoping 444). For example, Plato was considered one of the first absolutists because to him there was only one way to behave or act in particular situation (Dombrowski 16). For Plato, context or shades of grey did not apply. There are potential problems with absolutism, though, because it can lead to “cultural intolerance” (Bleazby 455). Absolutism suggests that there is only one right way of acting, believing, or behaving, which promotes an “ethnocentric adherence to one’s own cultural norms” (Howard 315).

Ethnocentrism is an individual believing in the superiority of his or her own country or culture compared to others (Sadri and Flammia 255). Chun-yan asserts that an ethnocentric perspective also suggests that “one’s ethnic group is the center of everything, against which all other groups are judged” (78). Ethnocentrism and biases can also promote stereotyping where people take generalizations that may or may not be true and use them to label other individuals (Vinacke 265). Furthermore, other individuals and cultures are seen as having negative traits and unwanted characteristics (Rendon 298). Stereotyping and ethnocentrism provide a means to judge other people based on untrue characteristics and to unreasonably criticize their behavior.

Understanding ethnocentrism and stereotyping is important because people have different beliefs and values that impact how they view the world and interact with other individuals. Absolutism is the belief that there is only one correct way or one correct culture, which could start conflict, disagreements, oppression, or even genocide. For example, two individuals have different personal interests and are discussing an issue. In

this situation, only one of them can be correct with an absolutist standpoint and conflict could ensue (Gewirth 283). Similarly, absolutism can be used as justification for oppression because only one cultural beliefs and values can be correct. In that instance, a culture that maintains an absolutist standpoint would feel superior and could oppress another culture or in a worst case scenario, use absolutism as grounds for genocide. Absolutism can also hinder rational listening abilities because absolutists believe that their culture and values are correct and are less likely to want to discuss alternative ideas and suggestions (Bleazby 455). For instance, absolutism discourages an open discussion and alternative beliefs because there are no shades of grey; a decision or behavior is simply right or wrong.

Relativism

Relativism focuses on the context of a particular culture, and actions cannot be judged right or wrong by outside criteria (Sadri and Flammia 259; Pirozvand and Nassiri 593). Relativism holds that what is moral in one culture is correct within that culture, regardless of the morality of the same action within other cultures (Markel 38). This particular ethical standpoint can reduce prejudice among cultures. Individuals make judgments about people in other cultures on a daily basis. For example, eye contact is important in the US as it shows when people are interested and focused; however, for some Asian and Hispanic cultures, “eye contact is thought to be disrespectful or rude” (“Cultural Differences”). A lack of eye contact raises suspicion for someone from the US as people usually avoid direct contact if they are lying or trying to cover something up. In this example, someone from the US would think a Hispanic’s cultural practice is odd and someone from a Hispanic culture would think the US practice is odd. Using a relativist

perspective reduces prejudice because what is ethical in one person's culture may be unethical in another and vice versa and as a result, individuals cannot ethically judge one another without the proper context. If an action or behavior is deemed ethical in South Africa it is considered ethical by South Africans, people from the US, or individuals from any other country because of the context of the action. Regardless of country or culture, if an action is ethical within that culture then it will be deemed as ethical by people from other cultures if they are maintaining a relativistic point of view. However, in an extreme case, relativism could promote injustices such as genocide and other forms of persecution and torment. For example, kidnapping children and turning them into soldiers in Uganda or the mass extermination of Jewish people in the Holocaust could be justified because with relativism, it would never be appropriate for anyone outside a culture to question the behavior of individuals within that culture or to question the ethics of their actions. In these instances, people in the US cannot ethically say that behavior is right or wrong in Uganda, Germany, France, or anywhere else in the world. Also, people cannot try to change a situation even if they find it unethical based on their own cultural standards. In these instances, behavior would simply be qualified as ethical in that particular culture and situation (Piroozvand and Nassiri 593).

The relativist view also negates the idea of absolutism or universalism as each ethical situation is dependent solely on the context of the culture (Markel 38-39). Relativism is the belief that actions will be always ethical in particular context for one culture, even if the same practice or belief is unethical in other cultures. For instance, polygamy is unethical in the context of the US and many Western cultures, but is ethical

and accepted in many Islamic cultures that support the practice (Markel 38). So long as a culture finds a behavior, belief, or value ethical, then it is ethical within that culture even if other cultures find it unethical due to differences in morals or values. While relativism allows for understanding other cultures and their differences, relativism does not allow for judging and evaluating ethical behavior because the context and culture determine whether an action or behavior is ethical, not personal beliefs and values. The last ethical approach serves to give guidelines for judging behavior, but doing so in a respectful manner. More specifically, contextual relativism combines absolutism and relativism to find a middle ground, where judgment can be made on ethical issues without promoting ethnocentrism and conflict.

Contextual Relativism

With contextual relativism ethical considerations are determined by the context of each instance. More specifically, ethics can only be applied “on a case-by-case basis and context-by-context basis” (Ting-Toomey 274). Contextual relativism serves to blend relativism and absolutism to accept the cultural differences that make societies unique, while negating behaviors and actions that would ultimately cause death and destruction. An action or behavior is always a “unique case” and cannot be judged against another situation or in another culture (Ting-Toomey 274). Likewise, neither culture is right or wrong in their beliefs because one culture cannot justifiably judge another. Likewise, ethical considerations are based on understanding the context of the situation such as social standards or the specifics of the situation (Sadri and Flammia 264). Upon understanding the context and discussing the reasoning for a particular action or behavior,

it is then possible to evaluate a situation and accept a behavior or action, withdraw from a behavior or action, or find a compromise (Sadri and Flammia 267).

The Sophists were early cultural relativists, believing that ethics is dependent on the circumstance (Dombrowski 21). In a particular circumstance, each individual or culture is right and valid within its own context even if cultures differ on what is appropriate and acceptable. Contextual relativism suggests that an ethical stance should not be made from an ethnocentric point of view (Sadri and Flammia 264) and all decisions should be made with an open mind and with respect. In this regard, communicators recognize that a universal ethical code is not plausible, yet also understand that their attitudes and beliefs should be dependent on the context and culture in which a specific behavior occurs and not solely their own personal standards. In many cases, ethical decisions and evaluations need to be made, but it is important to do so in a respectful and mindful manner. Respectfully communicating across cultures and doing so in an ethical manner is vital for many people, but particularly for technical communicators. Many technical communicators work in global virtual teams and have to find ways to recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas with diverse colleagues.

Technical Communication and Virtual Teams

The discussion on ethics and culture is extremely important for technical communicators and for individuals working with global virtual teams. First and foremost, a lot of ethics research presents only the US and/or Western perspective (Shuter 444). As technical communicators, maintain an open mind and respect when learning about other cultures and finding ways to ethically communicate across cultures. One of the biggest

challenges is that different cultures have different beliefs and values. Part of ethics is being honest and respectful in communication with team members from other cultures, while learning to respect their values and beliefs. Ethics provides a means for understanding differences in beliefs, practices, and values, while finding a respectful way to overcome these challenges effectively within a virtual team.

While each ethical approach is beneficial for better understanding cultures, they have limitations within a virtual team because determining whether an action or behavior is ethical is dependent on the circumstance and the context. For example, a relativist view states that a behavior is acceptable in a culture so long as the culture views it as ethical. The relativist view also states that one culture cannot judge the actions of another culture as unethical. This idea has profound implications for technical communicators as it could imply that the business practices of an organization, such as presenting false information, are indeed acceptable (Markel 39). For instance, some cultures are very conservative and women are not allowed to wear revealing clothing. If a technical communicator is designing documentation for a speedboat in one of these cultures, then he/she must find out what images would be acceptable and approved by the culture (Voss and Flammia 76). Although a speedboat manual in the US might include scantily clad women, other cultures may have women covered up or not include women at all (Voss and Flammia 76). While this example does not involve a life or death situation, the issue is whether to follow the values of the conservative culture and not include pictures of women or the values of the US culture and include the women in revealing clothing. In this instance, it is whether to include women,

but in some cases it could be whether or not to include an important safety warning as one culture may be less worried about lawsuits and safety as compared to another.

A similar difficulty exists with contextual relativism where different beliefs and behaviors are acceptable in different cultures. Challenges exist in working with teammates who have very different values and beliefs. Intercultural ethics does, however, help to supply guidelines for respectful communication across cultures. The main guideline with using any of the ethical approaches is to refrain from judging cultures in an ethnocentric manner especially within a virtual team. Having pride in one's culture or demographic group is beneficial, but being too prideful and ethnocentric can cause conflict and disagreements with those of other cultural backgrounds (Casmir, "International Communication" 22). In these instances, conflict may ensue for a couple of reasons. One, an individual who is ethnocentric is likely to look down on other culturally diverse team members and may speak or write in a derogatory manner towards other team members. While these ethnocentric beliefs may be unconscious, speaking from a point of pride may put down other team members and make them feel unworthy. Two, ethnocentric individuals are likely to have inherent biases against other cultures as they may not be as patient, understanding, and respectful as they should because they feel their culture is better than all others. Chun-yan states that an ethnocentric perspective "can prevent open communication and result in misunderstanding and mistrust" (Chun-yan 80). Likewise, individuals who are ethnocentric or believe stereotypes are not as tactful, and team members who are ethnocentric are likely to experience heightened tensions and difficulty with empathy (Rendon 298). In these instances, basic communication may easily turn into

disagreements and conflict because it is harder to reasonably and sensibly work through issues while maintaining an ethnocentric perspective. Ethnocentrism can promote hostility and “open conflict or wars” as well as cultural conflict (Bizumic and Duckitt 887; Hammond and Axelrod 927). Ethnocentrism can also support aggression and feeling that one is “competing” or “battling” with other individuals (Neuliep and Speten 6). Individuals with ethnocentric beliefs may “verbally assault, ridicule, or insult” others while being “stubborn and uncooperative” (Neuliep and Speten 13). These communication difficulties are even more apparent when team members already have different cultural beliefs or practices.

Know the effect that culture has as someone from one culture is likely to have different morals, values, and beliefs as compared to someone from another culture. As the economy is becoming increasingly globalized, it is imperative to understand cultural relativism and maintain the belief that different behaviors and actions are acceptable for one culture but not another (Markel 178). Similarly, for technical communicators in particular, no prescribed method exists for adapting a message from one audience to another culturally diverse audience (Markel 180). This idea is important as many times team members will hold different values from each other and from their audience and these differences need to be understood. Differences between teammates may produce disagreements and respect and understanding in communication may become a challenge. Intercultural ethics provides some basic guidelines for honestly and respectfully communicating across cultures.

Application of Ethics to Culture

In order to know how to best work with other cultures, it is imperative to learn about them; however, there is a fine line between understanding cultural differences and stereotyping. Every individual has his/her own cultural background and differences are always present. In a worst case scenario, cultural differences can lead to serious and catastrophic situations. According to Cleveland, cultural differences are part of the “damaging collision of individual human rights, cultural human diversity, and global human opportunities” (Cleveland 427). Communities around the world are becoming increasingly connected through the global economy and through the pervasive nature of the internet. As people in these communities are interacting, cultural diversity is amassing. Under most circumstances, cultural differences should not cause more than a disagreement or minor challenge. These challenges will be more along the lines of disagreements based on religion, work values, or communication methods. Individuals will be inherently different and must learn to work together in virtual teams.

Although individuals have different values, morals, and beliefs, differences are not necessarily a bad thing (Sadri and Flammia 268-269). Try to maintain respect where everyone has the same rights, regardless of culture differences (Batelaan 238). Moreover, respect is cultivated by trying to understand people with the best of intentions, taking all communication seriously, and refraining from stereotypes or judging others (Batelaan 238). It is also valuable to maintain a cultural sensitivity while listening and communicating with individuals from other cultures (Voss and Flammia 79). Cultural sensitivity would imply being respectful in communications with other cultures and

empathy for the other individual's point of view. Team members are likely to feel respected, valued, and included if team members are sensitive and appreciative of cultural differences.

All of these suggestions for being a respectful communicator are beneficial for intercultural relationships; however, no prescribed method exists for intercultural collaboration and solving problems (Casmir, "Ethics, Culture" 101). Much of the literature on intercultural communication discusses strategies and solutions, but to date, there is not a rigid, failsafe procedure for communication as culture is constantly changing. The fact that culture constantly changes is beneficial because it is adaptable and matures in its beliefs and values; although, that does make it challenging to develop a strategy for intercultural communication as what works today might not work in a few weeks, a few months, or even a few years. Looking at these ethical elements in intercultural communication, there needs to be an understanding of the current ethical approaches.

Conclusion

This chapter first defined culture and then defined ethics by discussing three current ethical approaches: absolutism, relativism, and contextual relativism. Then the chapter discussed the impact of culture and ethics on technical communication and virtual teams as well as the application of ethics to culture. People with different religions, values, beliefs, and cultures are interacting in person and in virtual teams. With increased diversity comes the potential for conflict and disagreement as individuals with different perspectives are coming together and needing to find a way to collaborate effectively. Having a strong understanding of not only virtual teams, but some of the challenges of working within

intercultural virtual teams allows for creating and developing guidelines for respectful and effective communication as well as finding preventive measures for conflict.

CHAPTER THREE: ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

For technical communicators working in multicultural virtual teams, ethical challenges are likely to arise as individual team members have very different cultural beliefs and values. Based on his or her cultural background each individual has specific views on authority, conflict, personal interests, short-term and long-term goals, and business practices. These cultural differences and possible language barriers have the potential to lead to challenges in communication within a virtual team. Furthermore, while technology and difficulties with scheduling may not cause ethical challenges directly, they can exacerbate these issues. Moreover, these ethical challenges “have the potential to lead to misunderstanding, miscommunication, dispute and even conflict” (Sadri and Flammia 9). Two questions arise when seeking to address ethical issues in virtual teams:

1. What are some potential ethical challenges for virtual teams?
2. What are the methods for solving ethical challenges in virtual teams?

The chapter first discusses the potential ethical challenges of working in a virtual team. Then the chapter discusses the current methods for solving ethical dilemmas. It is necessary to discuss potential ethical challenges and what can cause these issues before addressing the methods for solving ethical challenges as they arise. The Potential Ethical Challenges section discusses time zones and holidays, language barriers, cultural differences, and technology. The section on Current Methods for Solving Ethical Dilemmas presents five methods for solving ethical dilemmas: training, collaboration skills, eliminating biases, adapting communication, and understanding and adapting to culture.

Potential Ethical Challenges

Ethical challenges that many multicultural virtual teams face can be categorized in a couple of ways. One of the most difficult initial challenges of working in a multicultural virtual team is to understand the planning and scheduling that needs to occur. For any sort of collaboration, plan out meeting times and deadlines in advance so each team member understands his or her responsibilities. Although scheduling is somewhat easier in a face-to-face collaboration, it is more difficult in a virtual team. While some virtual teams may be within a single state or country and would only have time differences of a few hours, many others operate virtually across the world and are more challenging to schedule. In general, business practices, time zones, holidays, and mealtimes will be different (Duarte and Snyder 68-69) and team members need to be aware of these differences. For example, if a team is composed of members from Orlando, Florida and Hong Kong, China, then there is a 13-hour time difference. Meeting at 9 a.m. in Orlando would mean meeting at 10 p.m. in Hong Kong. In these situations, at least one team member is likely to have to go to work extremely early or stay extremely late to be a part of any meetings or synchronous communication. Scheduling issues can turn into ethical challenges as a team member would feel alienated and inconvenienced if he or she always had to get to work early or stay late to meet with the rest of the centrally located team. If the burden is not evenly split within the team, minor disagreements and conflict could occur. Likewise, not recognizing and planning for scheduling differences could potentially lead to team members being offended or feeling inferior as the team may forget, unintentionally, that a certain team member does not work during the middle of the afternoon due to a religious restriction or

cannot work certain days due to holidays. As a result, one team member, or even several members, may feel resentment and may even feel like outsiders within their own team because of scheduling challenges. The challenge here becomes how to split the burden while still finding times that work for all team members to meet. Understanding the challenges that occur with time differences and holidays and to schedule around them as much as possible helps to mitigate inconveniences.

Time Zones and Holidays

Since there is not an easy and convenient time to meet due to team members being in different time zones, the best solution is to make meetings as short as possible to limit the time that team members are away from their families or are not able to be sleeping. Short meetings are especially important in a case where the team may be dealing with a time difference of ten hours or more and any meeting will inconvenience some team members. For instance, Klein and Kleinhanns interviewed a team with members from Asia and the US. In this virtual team, some members were in the meeting at 6 am, some at 10 pm or 11 pm, and the rest were in between (Klein and Kleihanns 388). Moreover, the attention span of the team may vary as those who just arrived at work are more focused and awake as compared to the team members attending the meeting at 10 pm after a long day (Klein and Kleinhanns 388). Moreover, the scheduling causes 10 to 12 hour days as the team members in Asia are coming in early for meetings, while the ones in the US are staying late. It is possible to make accommodations in these situations, but these meetings are challenging to coordinate and cause definite inconveniences. In some cases, however, the time difference may only be a couple of hours. In these situations, none of the team

members are inconvenienced. For example, Jones, Oyung, and Pace discuss an individual in France who was working with a team in the US. When the team had meetings, the rest of the team would be at work at 8:30am their time while he would be at work at 5pm his time and in that case, he would stay later at work compared to some of his coworkers (Jones, Oyung, and Pace 95). Like time zones, holidays can cause scheduling challenges.

Team members observe different religions, celebrate various holidays, and maintain their own work schedules whether coming in to work early and leaving in the early afternoon or having a long lunch and staying later at night all of which can cause scheduling challenges. In these cases, some team members may not be in the office certain days of the year due to their holidays, while other team members may not observe those specific holidays, but may celebrate others. For example, Riopelle et al. discuss Texaron Technology, a textile producing company, whose managers began to work virtually as international demand increased. There were seventeen managers from the US, Germany, Japan, and England who would work virtually, but would also meet face-to-face once every quarter, rotating where the meetings were held to share the burden (Riopelle et al. 249). For one meeting in particular, the team was using a German office and did not realize that the meeting fell on a German national holiday (Riopelle et al. 249). Since it was a holiday, the German managers did not attend the meeting, but the other members of the virtual team were present. The team was lucky and was able to use the room after convincing the German Works Council that no German citizens were actually going to use the facility. In some cases, however, the team would have been required to reschedule. Furthermore, some cultures have different work schedules, where some are likely to take longer lunches

in the middle of the day, others may stay late in the day, and others get off early in the afternoon. For example, individuals in Spain tend to take a siesta in the middle of the afternoon where they may go home for lunch. Many times, the siesta lasts from 2 pm to 4 pm and makes arranging business deals with Europe and the rest of the world a challenge since there are 2 hours lost during the day (Desehenaux 125). Similarly, individuals in Latin America work until 7 pm during the week and even later on Friday nights (Duarte and Snyder 68). For many Latin Americans, working late is standard, but for many other cultures, like the US, employees may only stay at work until 5 pm at the latest. In terms of virtual teams, it appears that while “different time zones may positively affect the productivity of a virtual team by enabling work to be accomplished continually; they may also create delays and necessitate greater coordination” (Dubé and Paré, “Multifaceted Nature” 11). As a result, technical communicators need to understand these differences and be willing to be as flexible as possible to maintain effectiveness. The ethical challenge becomes finding that common ground as there are so many variations in terms of time and availability, and the challenges become greater as the team gets larger. As team size increases, so does the diversity. Each individual has a distinct culture that impacts how he/she thinks, acts, and behaves. These cultural differences are important to understand as they can hinder virtual team effectiveness and possibly contribute to disagreements or conflict.

Cultural Differences

It is vital to understand cultural differences in a virtual team as different organizations, countries, and individuals each have their own values, beliefs, and standards

for behavior. At the most basic level, organizations in different locations tend to have “different views on how the work should be performed and may use different work processes” (Hinds and Weisband 28) such as different measurement systems, preferred software programs, and technology. While there may be some similarity and a compromise can be found, initially decisions are going to have to be made as to which company’s policies to follow. For instance, Markel presents a case of a US-based company, McNeil Informatics, submitting a proposal to a company in Saudi Arabia, Crescent Petroleum, to create and implement an Ethernet (191). The CEO of McNeil Informatics is a female and many of the top executives are also female.

In Saudi Arabia, females do not have the same status as males and are not considered fit for leadership roles. For example, women did not have the right to vote until 2011 and even now are supposed to have a male chaperone if out in public. While women do work, the unemployment rate for women was 45.8 percent as of 2008 (“Saudi Arabia”). In the Islamic and Saudi Arabian culture, there is a not a strong support of women and especially of women in leadership roles. Due to the status of women, traditional Saudi Arabian companies are likely to want to work with an organization that holds their same views towards women or are composed of mostly men. If Crescent Petroleum knows that McNeil Informatics is run mostly by women, they will choose another company that has a male representative, male CEO, or more male employees because of the view of women in the Arabian culture.

While Saudi Arabia is a male-dominant culture, it could be discriminatory to the women to either not mention their positions or only let a man represent McNeil

Informatics. In this situation, both countries are right in their beliefs in their own contexts (and thus, within their own countries). McNeil Informatics would recognize that both ways of thinking are correct and would have to determine how much, if any, to accommodate (Markel 192). For this case, it is important to balance the cultural context of the dominant male view in Saudi Arabia without discriminating against the American women. Markel suggests using only initials instead of full names and not disclosing that the CEO is a woman (193) where the company is not lying and is also being respectful to Crescent Petroleum and their views on women. By examining the context and the impact that the context is going to make, a decision can be made without being disrespectful of the employees of either corporation. Cultural differences and values impact how individuals behave in certain situations as they did in the example of McNeal Informatics. These differences can be better understood by examining cultures in relation to Hofstede's Cultural Value Dimensions.

Cultural Value Dimensions

Geert Hofstede determined a way to understand cultures based on five cultural value dimensions: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and the Confucian Dynamism Dimension also known as long-term versus short-term orientation.

Individualism versus Collectivism

The first of the cultural value dimensions is individualism versus collectivism. By definition, individualism is how likely individuals are to promote their personal needs,

desires, and thoughts over those of the group (Duarte and Snyder 57). Collectivism, in contrast, is the tendency to promote one's group, whether family, friends, or a work group, as opposed to personal interests (Zormeier and Samovar 227). Collectivists tend to focus more on relationships, the family, and the group. These individuals typically try to blend in to the group and promote the group before their individual wants and desires. Collectivists also tend to hide differences, prefer consensus, and promote group unity and responsibility (Hardin, Fuller, and Davison 136). Individuals from collectivistic cultures share in each other's sorrows and praises, have the need to protect and help members of their group, and tend towards cooperation and affiliation (Zormeier and Samovar 226-227). Additionally, collectivists also dislike attention being drawn for praise or criticism (Duarte and Snyder 57). For example, Riopelle et al. discuss the ASC Newbiz team composed of members from the US and Japan. The team was created to obtain a contract for manufacturing parts of a vehicle that would be sold in the US, Japan, and Europe (Riopelle et al. 261). While working in the team, one of the US managers of ASC NewBiz would use e-mail for basic communication such as sharing updates and statistics with the US and Japanese team members, but would use videoconferences to work through disagreements about translation problems, technology issues, and miscommunications that occurred (Riopelle et al. 246). In this situation, the collectivistic Japanese disliked public disagreement. Team members from collectivist countries would much prefer private ways of communicating disagreements, such as a phone call or e-mail (Riopelle et al. 246).

On the contrary, individualistic countries focus more on promoting individual success, power, and wealth as compared to the group and group harmony. People from

individualistic cultures are typically not tied closely to other people and are taught to promote their own interests (Duarte and Snyder 54). These individuals will want to stand out and be recognized for their achievements and they also “value personal goals, initiative, autonomy, and privacy” (Hardin, Fuller, and Davison 136). Moreover, individualists express their opinions and emotions more openly because there is much more individual freedom (Anderson 263). These individuals are more direct with their thoughts as individualistic cultures accept differences of opinion, and differences are promoted.

Individualist and collectivist cultures have very different views on combining business and personal relationships. For example, most individualistic cultures, like the US, focus simply on the business deal and want to accomplish the deal as quickly as possible. Other cultures, particularly collectivist countries, care more about the relationship. These individuals may only work with certain people that they have gotten to know really well or may require potential business allies to meet for a lunch or dinner to build the relationship. For collectivist individuals, trusting the other individual is extremely important as well. For instance, Goldman discusses American and Japanese businesses, where the Japanese are not very talkative under most circumstances, but appreciate the small talk before and after meetings (Goldman 118). The Japanese culture has a strong focus on business relationships and individuals want to know the people and the companies they are interacting with before making business deals. These individuals can learn a lot about an individual from the small talk and will ultimately decide whether it is a worthwhile business venture based on that personal business relationship. In general, collectivists are more likely want to establish personal relationships with the people with whom they are doing business.

Understanding the differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures is important for two main reasons. One, it is valuable to understand cultural differences when communicating with individuals from other cultures to prevent offending teammates and acquaintances. Two, recognizing the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is beneficial for understanding behaviors within a group setting, such as conflict styles. Not all individuals from a collectivist or individualistic country have the qualities discussed in this section, but many individuals do share those beliefs and attitudes. The individualistic and collectivistic cultural value dimension allows for better understanding cultures. Members of individualistic cultures are typically motivated by personal ambition, while members of collectivistic cultures are more concerned with group harmony. Similarly, individualistic and collectivistic individuals have different approaches to conflict solution.

Power Distance

The power distance dimension has to do with how less powerful individuals accept and expect unequal distribution of power within a society (Duarte and Snyder 56; Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96). The distribution of power is the result of the actions and behaviors of the more powerful individuals and thus, affects the less powerful individuals (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 61). The higher the power distance the more accepting the culture is of unequal distribution of power. For example, cultures with high power distances are more authoritarian and have a select few individuals in power who make important decisions (Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96; Cassell and Blake 153). Likewise, inequality based on wealth, power, and status and is accepted in high power distance

cultures (Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96; Cassell and Blake 153). With such a high power distance, these cultures are likely to value status and have some sort of system for maintaining status, such as the caste system in India (Anderson 264). Likewise, high power distance cultures have a high respect for managers, bosses, and any individual considered superior and are very unlikely to question their authority in any manner (Duarte and Snyder 56).

In contrast, countries that maintain a low power distance prefer equality among individuals and would support democratic ways of making decisions (Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96). Low power distance countries maintain individuality, have a minimal respect for authority, and are willing to challenge superiors (Cassell and Blake 153). For low power distance countries, being wealthy and powerful is not exclusive to a particular group of people so there is not the sense of unequal distribution of power. Moreover, low power distance cultures are more expressive and are willing to challenge a superior if the situation seems appropriate. For instance, Duarte and Snyder discuss a virtual team leader who wanted the team members to give suggestions and ideas to management and to challenge them if necessary. The Chinese team member had issues with this because China is a high power distance culture and most Chinese people will not challenge superiors, even if asked to do so (Duarte and Snyder 56). Understanding the power distance cultural dimension is beneficial for defining not only a culture's view of authority, but for recognizing behavior between a team member and a team leader or manager.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance dimension has to do with how comfortable individuals within a culture are with risk and how accepting they are of ambiguity and uncertainty. In terms of uncertainty avoidance, there is high uncertainty avoidance and low uncertainty avoidance. High uncertainty avoidance cultures dislike ambiguity and uncertainty. These cultures want a precise answer to a question or problem, are more disposed to show emotions, and tend to be Southern European and South American countries (Anderson 266). People from these cultures also prefer plans, routines, closure, and may experience anxiety in situations where there is not a clear answer to a problem or question (Duarte and Snyder 57).

Conversely, low uncertainty avoidance cultures are composed of individuals more accepting of uncertainty and risk. These cultures have less of a need for order, rules, and plans (Duarte and Snyder) and are able to be more flexible in an unfamiliar circumstance. Moreover, low uncertainty avoidance cultures include Northern European and South Asian countries (Anderson 266). Uncertainty avoidance is important for collaboration as there may not always be a clear solution for a problem and some cultures are more disposed to anxiety and accepting these situations better than others due to their cultural values and beliefs.

Masculinity versus Femininity

Masculinity versus femininity in a culture is whether a culture leans towards exhibiting masculine traits or feminine traits (Anderson 264). For example, the more

masculine a culture, the more there focus on success, wealth, and possessions (Duarte and Snyder 57). Furthermore, masculine cultures tend to support competition, strength, and ambition (Anderson 264). On the other hand, feminine cultures are supportive of more gentle qualities such as teamwork, sharing, and encouragement (Duarte and Snyder 57). Feminine cultures are less strict in their gender roles and would accept and expect both men and women to exhibit tender qualities such as modesty, helpfulness, and concern (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov 140; Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96). The differences between masculine and feminine cultures are apparent as masculine cultures, such as the United States, are sometimes thought of as loud and aggressive as compared to feminine cultures (Anderson 264). Masculinity versus femininity as a cultural value dimension defines cultures based on whether masculine or feminine traits are most prominent in society.

The Confucian Dynamism Dimension

The Confucian Dynamism Dimension also known as long-term versus short-term orientation is the extent that individuals within a culture support traditional, future-oriented values (Cassell and Blake 156). Individuals from cultures that have a long-term orientation are motivated by long-term success and maintain thrift, perseverance, a strong work ethic, a feeling of shame, and relationships based on status and order (Rinne, Steel, and Fairweather 96; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 236). Conversely, individuals from cultures with short-term orientation values are more short-term goal oriented. These individuals are driven by immediate returns and tend to be more impatient (Duarte and Snyder 58). Furthermore, short-term oriented cultures are not as supportive of traditions

because culture and traditions are ever-changing (Cassell and Blake 156). Individuals from short-term oriented cultures want quick results, are likely to spend more, have national pride, and maintain personal independence (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov 243; Cassell and Blake 157). Asian cultures typically tend towards long-term orientation values while the US and other English-speaking countries are more short-term oriented (Duarte and Snyder 58). Many of the cultural value dimensions, such as long-term orientation, are rooted in the differences between individualistic and collectivistic countries. The differences between individualistic and collectivistic countries are also seen in conflict styles. For instance, each culture has a particular view on personal ambition versus group harmony. These views are typically noticeable in the conflict style that each culture uses.

Conflict Styles

Individualistic and collectivistic countries have different ways of handling disagreements and conflict. There are five main styles for dealing with conflict including “avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging” (Croucher et al. 66). People using the avoiding style of conflict try to shy away from conflict and may even ignore the fact that it exists. Individuals using the compromising style are more direct and assertive, but still care about the happiness of both themselves and the other individual (Oetzel 133-134). Individuals using the compromising style use common ground to find a solution where both parties can be happy with the result. The dominating conflict style is based on personal interest (Oetzel 133) and individuals using the dominating style believe they are right and everyone else is wrong. The integrating style of conflict involves finding a way to make everyone happy. Individuals using the integrating style are concerned with

both the individual and the needs of the group (Oetzel 133). Finally, the obliging style promotes the group and fitting in and puts the needs of others before individual needs.

Typically, individualistic countries are more likely to use the dominating conflict solution style, and they are also more likely to bring up conflict and disagreements. More specifically, the dominating style is driven by competition and is rooted in a “win-lose orientation” (Gelfand et al. 1133; Trudel and Reio Jr. 400). This competitive nature can lead to “confrontational or critical remarks, accusations, and rejection of other person’s points” (Trudel and Reio Jr. 400). These behaviors can then heighten minor disagreements and turn them into conflict. Likewise, team members from individualistic countries are also more likely to put the individual first. Collectivistic countries, however, use the avoidance style, by staying away from conflict, or the compromising style, to try to find an agreeable solution as quickly as possible (Croucher et al. 66). In a virtual team disagreement, team members may exhibit different conflict styles, and the team will need to find a compromise. Conflict styles and the cultural value dimensions provide ways to better understand cultures based on characteristics such as the role of tradition, the acceptance of uncertainty, and the importance of group harmony. Additionally, high-context versus low-context provides a way to better understand cultures based on how meaning is derived in communication.

High-Context Cultures versus Low-Context Cultures

The idea of high-context and low-context cultures was developed by Edward T. Hall to explain the differences in communication across cultures. Context, as determined by Hall, is based on subject, situation, status, culture, and past experiences (Usunier and

Roulin 202). Context then determines how meaning is derived in communication between individuals. For low-context cultures, meaning is determined specifically by the message. For these cultures, meaning is determined on the explicitly stated text and speech of the communicator (Würtz 274). For high-context cultures, meaning is determined by the shared knowledge of the communicators. More specifically, high-context cultures obtain meaning through background information, personal opinions, historical facts, body language, and the absence or presence of silence (Duarte and Snyder 58; Würtz 274). In high-context communications, meaning is derived more significantly from the context, which is the nonverbal and situational cues, as opposed to explicitly stated message. Furthermore, whether a culture is low-context or high-context is one factor that dictates the communication styles that are used.

Individuals from low-context cultures are also more likely to promote their opinions, which could lead to conflict and confrontation if these opinions are different than the opinions of the rest of the group. Similarly, they are also more direct and explicit (Wang 152). Moreover, low-context cultures focus less on the relationship, gestures, and nonverbal actions and are end result focused. Individuals from low-context cultures may be thought of as overly talkative or repetitive because they state everything explicitly and do not rely on the implied context (Anderson 267). People from low-context cultures are typically from individualistic countries, such as Germany, Scandinavian countries, US, Ireland, and France (Würtz 277).

Individuals from high-context cultures value relationships, trust, and visual cues and focus on group harmony because they are collectivistic by nature. Likewise, these

individuals are more indirect and refrain from being confrontational (Wang 152). Nonverbal cues and gestures are also important in a high-context culture because meaning is derived more from actions and hesitation than from direct articulation of a message (Wang 154). For instance, people who know each other well are able to communicate thoughts and ideas with something as simple as a smile or glance (Anderson 266). In these cases, there is more to the message than what is explicitly articulated. High-context countries tend to be more collectivistic and include Japan, Arab nations, Greece, Spain, Thailand, and India (Wüertz 277; Croucher et al. 64).

Recognizing and understanding the differences between high-context and low-context cultures is especially important in intercultural communication encounters. In many instances, miscommunication and disagreements may arise because team members are unaware of the cultural preferences of their teammates. For example, Goldman discusses interactions between Japanese negotiators and American diplomats. Goldman explains how the Japanese are very particular and use high-context communication where they rely not only on speech, but on body language, and facial expressions (142). Furthermore, the Japanese use high-context communication to avoid direct conflict in a group setting (Goldman 142). Goldman presents a hypothetical example where American diplomats are likely to misread the messages of the Japanese negotiators or miss the nonverbal cues (142). Americans are not as high-context as the Japanese and are not used to relying on indirect communication to suggest meaning such as facial expressions and body language in combination with an articulated message. In these communication encounters, both the context and the explicit speech are needed to fully understand the

message. There are many ways to better understand cultures including cultural value dimensions, conflict styles, contexting, and the differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

Eastern versus Western Cultures

While the East is supportive of conforming to the group and is more collectivistic, the West is more individualistic and supports individuality and individual needs (Yun Kim 435). Conflicts and disputes can occur as individuals from the West are more direct and accepting of disagreements while individuals from the East tend to be more hesitant about stating their opinions and may be more concerned with preventing conflict in a group setting. For example, collectivistic cultures promote group unity and as such, collectivistic and Eastern cultures are more likely to exhibit “verbal hesitance and ambiguity – out of fear of disturbing or offending others,” (Yun Kim 435). These individuals prefer not to interrupt group harmony and can be very reserved in social settings. As compared to individuals from Eastern cultures, individuals from individualistic and Western cultures would expect a response that is “direct, explicit, and verbal, relying on logic and rational thinking” (Yun Kim 436). These individuals are usually more expressive, both in thoughts and emotions. In terms of working together, the same challenges exist within individualistic and collectivistic cultures and the East and the West. Individuals from Western cultures are more explicit and direct as compared to individuals from Eastern cultures who tend towards indirect responses, and it is important to be aware of these differences when working in a virtual team. For instance, Team Europe Connect was a 12-person virtual team with members from England, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland

(Gibson and Manuel 60). Members were from various disciplines and included representatives from two organizations, “two universities, one nonprofit institute, and one small consulting company” (Gibson and Manuel 60). An individual from the team discussed working with different cultures. This individual recognized that one of the challenges was how members of certain cultures were more candid and outspoken than others (Gibson and Manuel 74). These differences can easily be apparent across individualist and collectivist lines and across East and West cultural lines. Moreover, cultural differences are apparent across cultural norms including informal versus formal cultures, the role of women, business practices, and displaying emotion with a virtual team.

Cultural Norms

Each culture has distinct values, beliefs, and norms that dictate behavior and actions within the society. A culture norm is a widespread or usual practice, procedure, or custom (“Norm”). Differences in norms, like many other differences, have the potential to cause disagreement between team members. More specifically, cultural norms can hinder collaboration in a virtual team for several reasons. Some cultures are more formal and deadline-oriented than others which could cause disagreements. For example, individuals from detail-oriented cultures are likely to want specific schedules for projects and may confront team members who are less worried about schedules about their relaxed attitudes. Similarly, individuals that are not deadline-oriented may feel hurried or bothered by task-focused team members who try to control situations. In some cases, tasks may not be completed in a timely manner as individuals from an informal culture are less scheduling focused than individuals from formal cultures. Moreover, some cultural norms

involve displaying emotion in a team setting where some individuals may show too much emotion in a team and possibly offend a reserved team member or show too little emotion and are a cause for concern. Also, some cultures have an equal view of women while in others there is gender inequality; these norms may affect whether women are even in a virtual team in the first place. Overall, differences in cultural norms may cause slight annoyances or disagreements.

Informal versus Formal Cultures

Some cultural differences are based in cultural norms of a particular society, such as how some cultures have a stronger sense of urgency with deadlines as compared to others which is the result of formal versus informal cultures (Yun Kim 435; Kayworth and Leidner 187). Kayworth and Leidner found that “formal cultures will tend to a greater sense of urgency to set specific timetables and to diligently keep to deadlines” (187). Informal cultures put less emphasis on deadlines and schedules. While this may not always be the case, it is something to be aware of when working with individuals from other cultures.

Emotion and Trust within a Virtual Team

Some cultures are more accepting of showing emotions in a group setting than others. In a virtual team, culture may influence how expressive a team member is. For instance, cultures have different norms about expressing emotion in public. Crowe et al. conducted a study of people from India and the US to see what emotions were felt and expressed in hypothetical situations. They found that Americans were more likely to experience and show anger if they were cut off in line, and they are more likely to express

happiness for getting a job even if when competing against a friend (Crowe et al. 211). Indians, on the other hand, were more likely to express emotions of embarrassment or sympathy if a sibling did not get into a high-rated university or if they obtained a job that a friend did not (Crowe et al. 211). This study showed that the same event may elicit very different emotions from members of two different cultures. For example, the Americans experienced happiness in the same situation that the Indians experienced sadness.

The level of trust within the team may also affect how team members show emotion. For instance, some individuals are more likely to express emotions within a high trust team. Teams with higher trust levels have built stronger relationships, and team members feel more comfortable showing emotions. On the other hand, members of teams with lower trust levels are less likely to show emotions because their teammates are more reserved and critical (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 53). Furthermore, low trust teams are less likely to show emotion as there is not a high level of team bonding. In general, individuals have different ways of showing emotion and these differences are important to note within a team setting.

Role of Women

Society's view of women plays a role in virtual teams (Deifeit 117) as women are not viewed as equals in all cultures. For example, many countries in both Europe and North America have some form of gender inequality (Aramand 69). American women have full equality and the capacity to lead meetings (Dubé and Paré, "Multifaceted Nature" 18), but in cultures with gender inequality women are not seen as being fit for leadership roles. As discussed earlier, traditional Arabic culture would prevent women from becoming CEOs or

being in leadership positions. Islamic companies are not likely to want to partner with an organization that has a female representative. Moreover, in the Islamic culture, women do not have equal rights and a woman leading a meeting or being seen in a picture for a presentation or manual would be offensive (Voss and Flammia 84).

Business Practices

Business practices vary from culture to culture. For instance, cultures have different norms regarding punctuality in meetings (Dubé and Paré, “Multifaceted Nature” 18). In the US it is disrespectful and offensive to arrive late to a meeting, but for some slower-paced countries this would be acceptable. Many of these characteristics are cultural, though some are personality traits, and must be understood in order to find ways to effectively communicate throughout a project while minimizing frustration. Recognizing cultural differences in a multicultural virtual team is imperative to understand what challenges may persist and to know what considerations may need to be made. In a virtual team, cultural differences promote diversity, but can also lead to conflict and disagreement as team members have different values and beliefs. These situations can be exacerbated by miscommunication caused by language barriers.

Language Barriers

Another difficult ethical challenge related to working in virtual teams is language barriers and how to communicate effectively and honestly. Concerns tend to arise when team members either speak two different languages or speak the same language but with different accents and fluency. Kayworth and Leidner conducted a study with students from

Europe, Mexico, and the US to see what challenges would exist in highly diverse virtual teams. In order to see the results and find noticeable trends, Kayworth and Leidner administered questionnaires to the students that focused on cultural and technological challenges. While there were numerous cultural differences noted by the participants, the biggest challenge was the communication between the US and Mexican students because the Mexican students did not always understand what the US students said and vice versa (Kayworth and Leidner 187). For instance, the Mexican students had trouble understanding the e-mails of the US students and vice versa. In particular, the US students mentioned the e-mails they received being hard to understand and written in broken English and sometimes even in Spanish. Furthermore, while the Mexican students researched well, their written work had to be edited and rewritten to be comprehensible.

While this is just one case study, much of the literature on virtual teams and intercultural ethics supports the notion that cultural differences and language are important issues in communication between cultures. Many times virtual teams are composed of members who are speaking second or third languages and as a result, may not use the right vocabulary or correct sentence structure for the thoughts they are trying to convey (Klein and Kleinhanns 386). Likewise, individuals from different countries and cultures speak English with different accents which sometimes makes it difficult for team members to understand their speech (Klein and Kleinhanns 386). In these cases, it is more difficult and takes longer for team members to communicate ideas. For instance, Ferreira, Lima, and Costa studied virtual teams from Brazil, Malaysia, and Hungary and their working relationships with US counterparts. The authors conducted surveys,

questionnaires, and focus groups with these team members to determine the challenges they experienced while working in a virtual team. The authors found that there was a lack of understanding when individuals were speaking second and third languages. More specifically, many individuals were not speaking their first language so while they understood English, there were still comprehension difficulties (Ferreira, Lima, and Costa 427).

Moreover, the language barrier is challenging in a virtual team because some team members are hesitant to speak. For instance, Cordery et al. studied virtual teams at Alcoa, one of the world's top aluminum manufacturers, and conducted surveys of sixteen team leaders. One team leader explained how it is harder to explain an idea over the phone to a Portuguese speaker as compared to someone who speaks English (Cordery et al. 211). With the Portuguese speaker, comprehension is not always present because of the language barrier and as a result, the speaker is hesitant to talk in a teleconference (Cordery et al. 211). In this situation, the team is speaking English and the Portuguese speaker is trying his or her best to understand. However, the individual is having difficulty because it is not his or her native language so it takes longer to translate meaning between English and Portuguese. The speaker may be hesitant to speak for two main reasons. One, the speaker is concerned that he or she did not understand the message correctly. Two, the speaker is concerned that his or her response will not be worded well enough to be understood. Cordery et al. and Ferreira, Lima, and Costa seem to recognize that it is difficult for non-native speakers to understand the language and that communication will sometimes be hesitant and hindered as an individual must attempt to navigate the conversation.

Furthermore, even when speaking the same language there can be some difficulties in communication. For example, El-Tayeh, Gil, and Freeman conducted a survey of participants using virtual communication for digital socialization. The purpose of the study was to determine how effective various prototypes and technologies are for collaborative purposes in a digital or virtual environment. In the survey responses, the authors found that participants preferred text communication versus phone or videoconference communication because it was easier to understand teammates who would normally speak fast or have an unfamiliar accent (El-Tayeh, Gil, and Freeman 38). For these participants in particular, the language is the same, but there is difficulty in understanding spoken communication. Many times what is said and what is received are two very different things whether speaking the same language or different languages. With global virtual teams, it becomes imperative to find a way to communicate across language barriers while still respecting those individuals who are having trouble articulating their thoughts effectively and following the flow of the conversation. Although language barriers can contribute to miscommunication, technological issues such as proficiency and access can sometimes hinder communication before it even begins.

Technology

Although numerous ethical challenges have been discussed in regard to communicating honestly and effectively with team members from other cultures, one more challenge still needs to be discussed. Differences in available and preferred collaboration tools can cause challenges within a virtual team. Some technologies provide just the basic message, such as an instant message conversation or e-mail, which works just fine for low-

context cultures that are focused on the message. High-context cultures prefer focusing on the relationships and interactions via visual cues and would likely prefer videoconferencing or audio conferencing to add to the message. As there are so many collaboration tools available, the team will need to determine the best tools to use. Aside from preference, the issue of access arises as team members may or may not have access to the same technology.

Some team members may not have the same software or their versions of the software may be outdated. For instance, Techco has two divisions: one in the US and one in Europe. In sending drawings and part lists back and forth, the European engineers cannot always view the Americans drawings and the Americans are not even sure if the European engineers received them (Mohrman, Klein, and Finegold 48). In this case, the group may have to make accommodations to fit the situation. For example, the Americans may have to e-mail or call more often to check if a drawing went through or both the American and European engineers may have to find different software to use that works for both teams. Similarly, outdated software or less sophisticated equipment may become an issue and the team may be required to use only the most advanced technology that everyone in the group has access to, even if only e-mail and phone calls.

A similar issue with technology is whether training is provided and whether or not group members are technologically savvy and proficient with the technology. According to much of the virtual team literature, technological training is just as important as cultural training for effective team communication (Berry 201; Dubé and Paré, "Global Virtual" 72; Grosse 24). Technological training enables team members to understand the software and

devices being used and to understand the best methods for communicating through the technology. In some cases, technical training is not a viable option due to cost or resources. In that situation, the lack of training could cause of a lack of technical proficiency. In a virtual team, a lack of technical ability can be a detriment to group dynamic and effectiveness and would have to be remedied. For example, if a team member is not proficient with certain software, the team would need to be patient and understanding. If time allowed, coaching the team member about the software would be beneficial as well if a formal training class was not a possible option.

Overall, there are numerous ethical challenges that persist with virtual teams composed of members from multiple cultures. The key to these challenges is finding a way to overcome any “built-in biases” (Duarte and Snyder 67) and to find a way to handle any situation with care. Team members should recognize differences between cultures and be respectful and appreciative of those differences. More importantly, team members must recognize that global virtual teams are becoming more popular. With these global teams, challenges may occur that will harm group dynamic and hinder effectiveness if not resolved. As issues and conflicts arise, what can the group do to assuage the situation and return to a state of unity and success? Current literature on virtual teams has given a few suggestions for overcoming some of these ethical challenges; although, most of the suggestions are for solving and handling ethical dilemmas after they have occurred.

Current Methods for Solving Ethical Dilemmas

With multicultural virtual teams already in existence, some methods have been established for solving ethical dilemmas once they have occurred. These methods are not

necessarily panaceas for ethical dilemmas, but can at least provide a basis for recognizing a cultural issue and finding a way to overcome it in order to continue collaborating. The current methods for solving ethical dilemmas can be divided into six main categories: training, communicating effectively, overcoming biases, adapting communication, discussing culture, and building relationships.

Training

In terms of ethical challenges, taking some version of a training course for working in multicultural virtual teams would be the preferred method to understand ethical challenges and to find solutions. Most training courses would be offered prior to work in a virtual team and should provide team members with an understanding of cultural differences, particularly in language and norms, in order to overcome cultural challenges and barriers (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 108). Moreover, these training sessions also “prepare team members for religious differences that may influence virtual team performance” (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 109). There are different forms of training available, but any training course that presents the challenges of working in a virtual team, what can be expected, and how to be respectful about dealing with these differences would be beneficial. From these courses, team members are able to learn about other cultures and the differences between cultures in order to be aware of the ethical dilemmas that could occur. In many cases, training also provides suggestions for solutions to these ethical situations between different cultures.

While training for multicultural virtual teams is probably one of the best investments for not only preparing the team members for working in a team, but also for

providing suggestions and ideas for methods of solving ethical dilemmas, not all organizations have the resources, whether time or money, to spend on training. In that case, other methods need to be put into place to provide team members solutions for challenges that they may face such as learning the skills for effective collaboration.

Collaboration Skills

In a multicultural virtual team, certain skills are beneficial for recognizing issues and challenges and working as a team to overcome them. First and foremost, be respectful of those from diverse others, find common ground, and respect the importance of cultural differences (Sadri and Flammia 268-269). These guidelines would apply to any sort of communication with someone from a different culture or background, but are even more important in virtual communication as visual cues are lacking and meaning is derived solely through text or through an audio conference or phone call. Additionally, people need to “be honest and take responsibility” (Voss and Flammia 74). This idea is especially important in disagreements in a virtual team where a team member may not know the cultural differences and is not trying to offend, but accidentally does. Furthermore, have “patience, respect, and listening skills” (Grosse 34). These skills are invaluable as the team can use them to work through issues to reach some sort of compromise. Each culture has its own way of communicating and as a result it “takes time and patience to recognize and adapt to different communication styles and ways of handling meetings” (Grosse 34). These same skills that are important during collaboration are just as important in solving an ethical dilemma or challenge between team members where time and patience are needed to expand upon an issue and what needs to be done to correct it.

Communication skills can also help to overcome language barriers, where ideas are not being communicated as quickly or easily as possible due to cultural differences. Many virtual team members may be speaking or writing in a language that is not their first language and may have some difficulty, particularly in phone calls or video conferences where communication is instantaneous. In these cases, alternative methods can be used, if time and technology use permits, such as using e-mail which allows the user additional time to think about and write a message, especially if writing in a different language and from a different background (Grosse 27). Sometimes, however, it is not plausible to use alternative methods because they take too long or are too asynchronous for the task at hand. In that case, team members may “simplify communications by making them clearer, more direct, and more honest, eliminating idle, wasteful, and manipulative speech” while also needing to “respect the value of silence and nonverbal actions” (Yun Kim 440). Language barriers are just one ethical challenge that may develop, but many ethical challenges require being aware of collaboration skills and techniques and being willing to adapt accordingly to maintain the best relationships and effectiveness possible. Sometimes, however, challenges are present even when trying to communicate respectfully. In that case, the issue may be a result of a personal bias, whether conscious or subconscious, towards another culture.

Eliminating Biases

Another method for solving ethical dilemmas is recognizing personal biases and trying to eliminate them as much as possible. As unfortunate as it may be, many individuals hold conscious or unconscious biases towards other individuals for varying reasons and

these biases affect their behavior and their thoughts. Furthermore, one of the biggest challenges in working in a virtual team is actually working through biases (Duarte and Snyder 67). Due to this problem, recognizing personal biases becomes very important and making sure that they do not cause any ethical challenges for the team. Team members and team leaders need to understand their own biases and recognize the affects that these biases may have on their interactions with team members (Duarte and Snyder 80). These biases may come in the form of ethnocentrism, believing stereotypes, or in any other number of ways.

Moreover, team members must be aware of ethnocentrism and make sure that their behaviors and thoughts are not harming the group collaboration. Ethnocentrism, at its heart, is “the belief that one’s own culture or co-cultural group is superior to all others; that one’s own nation (or co-cultural group) is at the center of the universe” (Sadri and Flammia 255). Ethnocentrism also provides the “us versus them mentality where we compare our group (or culture) to that of others (the outsider) and lends itself to stereotypes and harsh judgments” (Sadri and Flammia 255). To be able to successfully overcome biases, individuals need to be aware of their biases and to try to maintain an open mind as much as possible. There is the balance of “the need to learn about other cultures and the desire to avoid stereotyping them” (Voss and Flammia 72), where only through knowledge and understanding can stereotypes and biases really be broken and changed.

One of the current methods for overcoming ethical challenges is being aware of other cultures and learning about their social standards and communication styles, (Voss and Flammia 81) while being open minded and recognizing that different cultures have

varying cultural norms, ideals, ways of resolving conflict, and verbal styles (Grosse 34). By recognizing and praising differences while being able to work around possible biases and ethnocentrism, virtual teams are able to come together to overcome these ethical and cultural challenges more effectively. Sometimes, however, communication is still lacking even after overcoming biases and learning to use collaboration skills. In these instances, the methods of communication may have to be adapted.

Adapting Communication

Changing the way that information is communicated is another method for solving ethical challenges. For instance, e-mail is easier for individuals who are not speaking their native language because it gives them time to look up the right words and make sure that they are saying what they are intending. Though, in some cases, communication cannot be completed via e-mail. For an important meeting or for time sensitive data, videoconferences or phone conferences may be the only option. In these cases, understanding and communication may be lacking across cultures, but how does one respectfully and honestly alter the communication?

In one study done by Anawati and Craig, 80 percent of the participants responded that that they spoke in a different manner when working with the team (47) while 60 percent changed the way that they wrote when communicating with the team (47). In these cases, an individual who is not using his or her first language may have to ask others to speak differently or those speaking in their natural first language might inherently need to alter the way they speak to promote better understanding. For instance, in both instances, team members may need to “speak slowly, avoid slang, keep words and sentences short,

confirm understanding, avoid jargon and acronyms, avoid metaphors, avoid humor, alter tone of voice, and allow for think time” (Anawati and Craig 47). Similarly, team members may also have to change languages (especially if some are bilingual and that is an option), adjust accents, or add visuals to PowerPoints, chat conversations, on screen while videoconferencing, or as e-mail attachments. Especially for videoconferences or phone calls, sending out e-mails with slideshow images or additional visual aids gives team members time to process the information and be able to follow along easier. In some cases communication can be improved simply by adapting the way one speaks or writes in virtual team communications. In other cases, communication can be improved simply by learning about the cultural differences of the team and adapting to these differences.

Understanding and Adapting Cultures

The final method for solving ethical dilemmas is all-encompassing as it includes discussing culture and getting to know team members better. Many of the ethical challenges faced in a multicultural virtual team are based on not understanding other team member’s values, beliefs, and cultures. There is a bit of tension with developing friendships with team members and understanding their culture as some people try to keep personal lives away from their work lives, but at the same time in a virtual team, team members are not going to be aware of these differences and be able to account for them without a discussion. For example, Anawati and Craig distributed a questionnaire to employees of an Information Technology (IT) firm who work in global virtual teams. Out of 122 responses, “sixty percent of respondents indicated that they would like team members to be aware of their culture” (Anawati and Craig 48). Based on this statistic, discussing culture within a

virtual team is one method that helps to solve ethical dilemmas even though there are several ways to do so.

One of the simplest ways to accomplish this goal is to talk about culture socially, such as during an introduction or conclusion to a phone meeting (Anawati and Craig 50). Additionally, discussing “weather, religious holidays, music, food, movies, personal activities, priorities, and interesting cultural facts were suggested as good social topics to assist in cultural understanding” (Anawati and Craig 50). Also, some virtual team members will send personal photos and will celebrate milestones virtually (Grosse 26). By discussing culture, personal life, and social topics, team members are able to better understand each other and are more likely to discuss challenges respectfully in the future.

Similarly, when scheduling, make sure to remember prayer times and religious holidays (Anawati and Craig 52). While it is customary to keep church and work separate, in virtual teams know what days and times are going to cause an issue. For instance, the first few deadlines may be fine, but partway through a project a deadline may fall on a religious holiday for one team member. This deadline could easily cause a challenge as the team member will not be in the office and would either go against her or her values to be working that day or will disappoint the team because his or her work is not ready in time. As a result, in multicultural virtual teams, discuss culture and availability, but be flexible and understanding in working with individuals from other cultures.

Along with discussing culture, discussing values and work practices would be beneficial for solving ethical challenges. Cultures are inherently different from each other and these cultural differences affect the way people think and behave in a group setting.

For example, some cultures promote individuals interjecting their thoughts in a conversation whenever the time seems appropriate, while others would rather be directly asked to speak (Anawati and Craig 51). This cultural difference could cause an ethical dilemma for members of a culturally diverse group. Most may be fine interjecting, but some may feel insulted because their opinions are not being shared because they are not invited to speak. Likewise, team members need to be careful in a group setting with criticizing or praising individuals or the team as it may not be received well by all team members (Anawati and Craig 51). In both of these cases, if team members discuss these potential issues early on and are flexible, understanding, and patient when these cultural differences occur, the ethical challenges can be solved or at least remedied. Additionally, a virtual team has the option to “adapt to suit the largest audience or dominant culture within a team” (Anawati and Craig 52) and have the other cultures alter their schedule or adjust their behaviors as much as possible. Adapting to the majority may not always work, but most team members should be flexible and willing to alter their schedule to make some sort of compromise whether or not they are in the dominant culture.

Overall, there are several methods and strategies that can be used to solve ethical dilemmas and challenges that occur in a multicultural virtual team. The ideal solution is cross-cultural training before working in a virtual team to develop an understanding and appreciation of other cultures to be inherently respectful and to anticipate potential challenges; however, training is not always available and may not always be the right solution. Learning to communicate and collaborate effectively, overcoming personal biases, adapting communication, and understanding culture while being flexible are some of the

current methods to recognizing cultural and ethical challenges within a multicultural virtual team and attempting to overcome them to promote better collaboration and effectiveness.

CHAPTER FOUR: SURVEY FINDINGS

As an increasing number of companies are using virtual work groups, it is essential for technical communicators to understand the challenges that are faced within virtual teams in order to find solutions and preventive measures. Technical communicators are more likely to work within global virtual teams and need to know how to communicate effectively within a team setting. While current literature on virtual teams exists, most does not focus specifically on the technical communication field. In order to better understand the experiences of technical communicators within virtual teams, a survey of the ethical challenges faced by technical communicators will yield valuable information about persistent ethical challenges and solutions for these challenges. The free response survey will ask practicing technical communicators about their experiences in global virtual teams, the ethical challenges they encountered, how these challenges were resolved, and how they might be prevented.

The chapter first discusses the methodology for the survey. Then the chapter will discuss the survey findings and the implications of the responses. The Methodology section describes the sample selection, survey components, data collection, use of human research, and analysis of the data. The Discussion of Survey Finding section discusses the challenges mentioned by the respondents, how these challenges were overcome, what preventive measures could have been used, and if the participants have any advice for others working in multicultural virtual teams.

Methodology

The intent of this study is to find the challenges that exist for technical communicators in global virtual teams. While extensive literature on global virtual teams exists, current surveys and case studies are either about global virtual teams in general or are about a field other than technical communication. Moreover, much of the literature on technical communication focuses on intercultural communication in the technical communication curriculum or on student virtual team projects. For instance, Han Yu discusses gauging a student's "intercultural competence" (168). Intercultural competence is the ability to successfully communicate with diverse audiences. Additionally, much of the virtual team literature focuses on student virtual team collaborations. These case studies and surveys are beneficial for better understanding the role of virtual teams in technical communication, but are still limited to a classroom perspective. Classroom studies are representative of the workplace because students from different cultures work together virtually to complete tasks; however, they are limited because they take place in a controlled environment. Many times professors will work together to create these virtual environments and are able to step in if teams are having trouble. In a workplace environment, teams may not always succeed or may have to find their own solutions.

There are many studies that look at virtual teams in the workplace. For example, Anawati and Craig conducted a survey with employees of Global IT Solutions firm to find out the role of culture within a virtual team and if cultural differences should be discussed by members of a virtual team at the onset of the collaboration via electronic communication tools (46). The authors found that the longer someone is in a virtual team,

the more likely they are to want their team to know about their culture (Anawati and Craig 54). They understand that as team members gain experience within virtual teams, culture becomes more important. Similar to Anawati and Craig's study, Cordery et al. conducted interviews at Alcoa, an aluminum manufacturer, to find out some of the challenges that were faced in working with diverse team members (205). In their study, Cordery et al. found that there was difficulty in getting people to talk in teleconferences because it was more difficult for them to communicate in a second or third language (211).

Virtual team work is also challenging because there are no visible cues and body language to indicate that someone does not understand if he or she does not ask for clarification (Cordery et al. 212). For instance, in face-to-face communication facial expressions hint whether individuals are listening and understand or are confused and not paying attention. Virtual teams lack these nonverbal cues, so it is difficult to know if someone is confused if he or she does not ask for clarification. While these two studies deal primarily with the role of culture within a virtual team, there are many workplace studies that look at virtual teams very generally.

Webster and Wong conducted an online survey of an information technology business to see how team satisfaction and perception ranked between collocated, semi-virtual, and virtual teams (46-47). In this study, Webster and Wong determined that collocated and virtual team members had similar positive experiences when working with their teams (54). This study also showed that virtual teams are able to develop trust even with a lack of visual cues (Webster and Wong 54). Likewise, the study showed that virtual team members have more positive perceptions of their working experience including the

team, projects, and work in general as compared to those working in a collocated environment (Webster and Wong 54).

Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison conducted a survey of a US broadcasting company and several Korean firms to find out the role that conflict has in virtual team performance (438). They aimed to find what impact the team leader's role has on conflict and team performance. Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison determined that team members do not see team leader's roles affecting conflict within a virtual team or team performance (450). They also found that there is not a connection between "conflict and team performance" in general (Wakefield, Leinder, and Garrison 450). This may be because team leaders will take on multiple roles to resolve conflict as much as possible (Wakefield, Leinder, and Garrison 450). Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison also assert that not only are there "positive outcomes from increased use of electronic communication" but virtual communication actually limits conflict in general (451).

Sivunen and Valo did an ethnographic study of Finnish virtual team leaders to see what affected collaboration tool preferences (51). In this study, Sivunen and Valo found that collaboration tool preference is based on "accessibility, social distance, idea sharing, and informing" where accessibility was the most important of the four (66). Social distance was also important and is used to explain the reliance many team leaders had on e-mail communication (Sivunen and Valo 51). Videoconferencing was preferred in virtual teams because of its face-to-face nature, but was rife with audio quality issues (Sivunen and Valo 51). Technology and collaboration tools are important to the success of virtual teams. Effective management is also vital to virtual teamwork. Johnston and Rosin conducted an

ethnographic study to learn how to manage virtual teams (2). In order to complete the study, a researcher worked for seven months at an unspecified company as a database administrator participating in a virtual team (Johnston and Rosin 2). Johnston and Rosin found that communication was challenging, especially when team members were speaking the same language, e.g. English, but with different accents (3). Communication was also challenging when teammates would speak a local dialect that the researcher and other teammates were not familiar with (Johnston and Rosin 3). Virtual team members are required to be flexible and are likely to work long hours, though the authors noted that this particular organization did not try to hire individuals with virtual team experience or bilingual (or multilingual) individuals (Johnston and Rosin 3). All of these studies are beneficial for understanding virtual teams; however, none of these studies focus specifically on technical communicators working in virtual teams.

By conducting a survey of practicing technical communicators, a couple of goals can be achieved. First and foremost, it will be possible to see the practical challenges that technical communicators face within virtual teams. Second, the survey will allow specific advice for individuals working within virtual teams. Virtual team literature discusses the challenges and methods for resolving conflict, but rarely is there advice and suggestions for working in a multicultural team. Finally, preventive measures and guidelines for ethical challenges within a virtual team can be suggested based on virtual team literature and the results of the survey. With such a small survey set, trends cannot be established; however, the experiences of the participants are still valuable. The results of the survey can be used to create future studies that further examine challenges within virtual teams with a large

sample. In order to conduct the survey, a few parameters must be set. The sample selection, survey components, and data collection must all be determined. Moreover, it is necessary to find a way to analyze the data.

Sample Selection

The population for this survey sample was limited to technical communicators who are 18 and older and have participated in a virtual team at some point in their career. Members of the Orlando Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication were contacted to see if they would be willing to participate. The goal was to find ten to twenty technical communicators who would have ten to fifteen minutes to complete the survey. Institutional Review Board approval was needed to conduct the study, and a small sample population is manageable and obtainable. Only contacting technical communicators limited the sample population as did only using members of the Orlando Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. While the message was posted in the List-Serv, it was assumed that not every member would be willing to participate, would have been a part of a virtual team, or would have the time to fill out a quick survey. It was also necessary to plan for gaining Institutional Review Board approval, contacting participants, and obtaining the results. The study received Institutional Review Board Approval in early November. In terms of the sample selection, participants were asked if they had experience working in global virtual teams. If they met this requirement, they were included the in the survey. Three participants were included that were not a part of the List-Serv. One female participant forwarded the survey to three colleagues, from the US, Australia, and Germany

respectively. These participants still met the requirements, but were not contacted directly via the List-Serv.

Survey Components

The survey was created in Microsoft Word to be downloaded and filled out by survey participants and e-mailed back. The survey was designed to evaluate both participant experience in virtual teams and the challenges that participants faced within global virtual teams. There were eight questions total with four questions involving experience and four questions involving challenges. More specifically, the survey asked about experience including the length of time in virtual teams, the number of teams participated in, number of cultures that were represented in each team, and the countries from which participants have had teammates in each virtual team. The survey also asked about the challenges of working in a virtual team, how these challenges were overcome, what could have prevented these challenges, and finally, if the participants have any advice for other individuals working in a global virtual team.

Data Collection

Fourteen practicing technical communicators who had participated in global virtual teams at some point in their careers responded to the survey. Participants were contacted via a posting in the Orlando Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication List-Serve. The majority of participants were from the List-Serv; however, some participants did connect the researcher with colleagues who were willing to participate. The majority of participants were located within Florida, although some participants were as distant as

Washington, DC, Germany, and Australia. All of the communication between the researcher and the participants was completed via e-mail from the researcher's personal e-mail and the work or personal e-mail of the participants. Participants were given a week to complete the survey. When the survey responses were received, each was saved denoting the gender of the participant and the order in which the survey was received. For instance, the first male response received was marked "Male 1," the second as "Male 2," and so on. The female responses were marked in the same manner with "Female 1," "Female 2," and so on.

Use of Human Research

Human subjects were vital for obtaining experiences of technical communicators in global virtual teams. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida granted permission to conduct this survey. Additionally, The Institutional Review Board waived the need for written consent and each participant was given a Summary Explanation before completing the survey. All names and personal information were kept confidential and the surveys were designated only by the gender of the participant.

Analyzing the Data

With only eight questions and such a small data set, it is virtually impossible to determine trends; however, the data set is still valuable as the survey is descriptive and uses free response answers. It provides challenges, solutions, and preventive measures in a small scale that can be used to create and develop future studies that examine these points in more detail by using a larger sample.

The intended goal of the survey is to look at the responses and see what challenges were discussed most frequently. The responses will provide information on the practical challenges faced by the respondents and the methods they used for mitigating conflict and challenges. These responses can be compared to current virtual team literature to highlight key challenges and preventive measures that can be examined in more detail with a larger sample population. The survey responses will provide suggestions for working in a virtual team that can be expanded and examined in more detail to add to the discussion on global virtual teams.

Discussion of Survey Findings

There were 14 technical communicators surveyed about their experiences and the challenges of working in virtual teams. Out of the 14 participants, 9 were male and 5 were female. Participants of the survey have spent anywhere from only 9 months to over 11 years in virtual teams. Participants were most frequently in virtual teams for three years. The respondents have participated in numerous virtual teams ranging from one to over 40 plus. Participants most frequently were a part of one, two, or five virtual teams. The cultures represented in the virtual teams also proved interesting because there were so many diverse cultures represented from such a small sample population.

Participants were asked the number of cultures that were represented in each of the virtual teams that they have participated in. Out of the 20 virtual teams that were discussed in the survey responses, 11 had three or fewer cultures represented. Nine out of the 20 represented virtual teams had somewhere between four and eight cultures represented. There were 27 countries represented among the virtual teams. The majority of the

participants were from the US, but there were two participants from Germany and Australia respectively. Each participant was asked to list the countries from which they have had team members. Table 1 lists each country that was mentioned and the number of times that each country was mentioned out of the 14 survey responses.

Table 1: Countries Represented Within Virtual Teams

Countries Represented	Number of Responses
India	10
United Kingdom	7
Australia	6
Italy	5
Germany	5
Canada	4
China	3
France	3
Greece	3
Russia	2
Switzerland	2
UAE	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Israel	1
Brazil	1
Portugal	1
New Zealand	1
Bulgaria	1
Denmark	1
Ireland	1
Netherlands	1
Argentina	1
Sri Lanka	1
Singapore	1
Mexico	1
Scotland	1

As Table 1 shows, participants worked most frequently with team members from Europe. Participants mentioned collaborating with individuals from 12 European countries. Working with team members from Asian countries was also frequent with eight

Asian countries mentioned in the survey responses. Finally, individuals from North America (US excluded), South America, and Australia were mentioned, but were not as common. Twelve of the fourteen participants were from the US, so the data describes cultures represented apart from the US.

Challenges of Working in a Virtual Team

The rest of the survey was four free response questions gauging participants experience in virtual teams. The participants were asked: what challenges were faced, what methods were used to overcome those challenges, what preventive measures could have been put into place, and if the participant had any advice for individuals working in virtual teams.

Although there were a variety of responses given by the participants, there were several challenges that were repeated throughout. For example, four main challenges were the most prevalent in virtual teams: communicating across time zones, language barriers, cultural challenges, and technology and organizational challenges.

Time Zones

Eleven participants noted time zone challenges. One participant noted that “the time difference is tough (especially in China - they are exactly 12 hours different)” (Female 5). Another participant worked with team members in Germany and explained how collaboration includes working with a six-hour time difference. Due to this difference, urgent questions or tasks need to be addressed by noon (Male 5). Finally, a participant working with teammates in India explained one challenge as the “time zone alignment for

meetings (PST- India)” (Male 1). Looking at the participant’s responses, it appears that time differences are difficult for both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Teams rely on e-mail to communicate across time differences as it is asynchronous; although, at least one team member was always inconvenienced during meetings. For instance, a participant explained how working across four to five times zones is a challenge especially “when stretching from London to Vancouver to Orlando to Pune to Hong Kong as someone (or some group) will always be inconvenienced” (Male 8). Dubé and Paré discuss time differences in depth because although working across time zones can be very beneficial for effectiveness, they may “create delays and necessitate greater coordination” (“Multifaceted Nature” 11). Time differences require planning ahead and flexibility for all team members to ensure the most participation in meetings and communication. Much of the virtual team literature discusses team members having to come early to work, staying late, or working around unexpected holidays to try to communicate as a team as much as possible (Klein and Kleinhanns 388; Jones, Oyung, and Pace 95; Riopelle et al. 249). While it possible to find times to meet across time zones, the central theme seems to be at least one team member will be inconvenienced.

Another common issue was getting problems resolved as teams would easily lose a day or two simply by waiting for information to be sent back and forth, even by e-mail. For example, in working between the US and India, there is “the day of the week difference” (Female 2). The participant explained how her Tuesday night, actually ends up being Wednesday morning for her teammates. Similarly, also between the US and India, “if you have a question for an Indian colleague after they’ve gone home for the day; you lose

basically a full day because you won't get your answer until the following work day" (Male 8). This response is consistent with virtual team literature as many sources give examples of people adjusting their schedules to make up for time differences (Dubé and Paré, "Multifaceted Nature" 11; Anawati and Craig 49; Kayworth and Leidner 186; Cordery et al. 209; Sivunen and Valo 63). For instance, Klein and Kleinhanns describe team members attending a meeting at 6 am and 11pm at their respective times (388) and Jones, Oyung, and Pace mention individuals shifting their days to start or end later to work with their virtual team (95).

Language Barriers

Language barriers were also a prevalent challenge as ten participants noted language barriers as being a complication within a virtual team. For example, one participant explained how "all of the team's business is conducted in English, but only about half of the team members are native English speakers" (Male 4). This participant went on to explain how non-native English speakers have trouble when the team uses certain idioms or phrases that do not translate well. Two participants noted that language difficulty arose in part to "accents coupled with varying degrees of audio quality" (Male 8) including "bad phone lines/background noise in voice meetings" (Male 1). Additionally, some accents are harder for them to understand than others including those from Arabia, India, and France (Male 1). Klein and Kleinhanns assert that when individuals have different accents while speaking the same language it is harder for them to understand each other (386). Likewise, several participants noted how language barriers made it hard to "understand each other" (Female 5) and that it is "more difficult to make questions and

answers clear to all team members” (Female 3). In these instances, there were challenges clearly articulating issues and questions, and it was difficult for teammates to understand each other.

Translation issues also occurred as what makes sense in English may not make sense in other languages and vice versa. Furthermore, two participants noted finding an agreeable writing style such as using British English as compared to American English. One participant explained this where spellings are slightly different in British English as compared to American English (Male 6). As would be expected, these challenges are in line with the current virtual team literature. These issues are seen in virtual team literature where comprehension and understanding is limited when individuals are speaking a second or third language and many times individuals are hesitant to talk in a group setting (Klein and Kleinhanns 386; Ferreira, Lima, and Costa 427; Cordery et al. 211).

Cultural Challenges

Cultural challenges were also prevalent in the survey responses as five participants noted cultural awareness. For instance, one participant explained cultural awareness in terms of the East and the West where even though the Eastern culture is more about relationships as compared to the transaction, virtual teams focus on the transaction (Male 2). Another participant discussed cultural awareness in understanding the value of job titles, management structure, and praise. He discussed how, in his experiences, team members from England were not as concerned about job titles or management as the teammates from India and China (Male 8). This participant also went on to discuss how his US team preferred group recognition, while his Indian teammates preferred individual

recognition (Male 8). In this particular circumstance, culture dictates the preference, and it is valuable to understand cultural differences to maintain as much harmony within the group as possible.

Participants also discussed culture in regard to non-verbal cues. Four of the fourteen participants noted non-verbal cues as a challenge in virtual teams. For instance, one participant explained how virtual teams do not allow for “reading body language” and understanding how people communicate (Female 3). Similarly, two participants explained that a lack of non-verbal communication makes it challenging to get the “nuances” in communication (Male 2; Female 5). One participant explained the difficulties of non-verbal communication in a virtual environment where a teammate may say that deadlines will be met, but is on the other end “rolling their eyes thinking ‘fat chance’” (Male 7).

In most circumstances, honest communication should occur with clear expectations, but non-verbal communication does provide more cues about if the meaning is genuine and honest.

Moreover, three participants noted understanding expectations and responsibilities as a challenge, while two participants mentioned sensitivity to what team members actually mean. For instance, one participant explained the challenge of “yes/no and what it means” (Female 1). Another participant explained the challenge of whether “‘yes’ means ‘yes I’ll do it’ or ‘yes I heard you’” (Male 2) and finding a way to make sure tasks still get completed. In these instances, cultures have very specific ways of communicating members of some cultures are more likely to give an affirmative answer without really meaning that something will or can be done. These challenges get exacerbated in a virtual team due to

the lack of body language and facial expressions. In a face-to-face meeting, body language and facial expressions help to convey meaning, but these are not visible cues in a virtual environment. The lack of non-verbal cues is especially difficult for some high-context cultures whose members rely on facial expressions, situational cues, and body language to understand the communication fully (Duarte and Snyder 58; Würtz 274). Individuals from high-context cultures, like Japan, rely more on nonverbal cues to communicate meaning (Wang 154; Goldman 142). These individuals are used to relying on non-verbal cues, so understanding a message specifically from explicit conversation is difficult.

Another challenge of working across cultures in a virtual is only forming partial relationships and focusing on the transactions and not on the relationships. For example, one participant noted how “Eastern culture is often more about the ‘relationships’ and Western is more ‘transactional’ and most interactions are not relational” (Male 2). For instance, the relational aspect of collaboration is apparent as some Japanese and other collectivists appreciate small talk and getting to know team members better through small talk (Goldman 118). In face-to-face meetings it easy to build personal relationships with team members, but it is difficult in a virtual team because so much of the work is task focused.

Moreover, one participant noted how the “sense of urgency differs” (Female 1) across cultures. Virtual team literature also discusses how some cultures have a stronger sense of urgency with deadlines as compared to others (Yun Kim 435; Kayworth and Leidner 187). Some cultures are considered formal cultures because they stress the importance of deadlines, schedules, and being on time (Kayworth and Leidner 187). These

cultures have a higher sense of urgency will be focused on having a precise schedule and that all milestones are accomplished on time without any delay. Informal cultures are less concerned with deadlines and schedules and are more relaxed in their work style. Not to say that these individuals will not accomplish tasks on time, but there is less of a hurry. For teams composed of individuals from both informal and formal cultures, there can be some difficulty in finding a balance of following the schedule, while not rushing some of the team. While they are still going to make the deadline, the approach to reaching deadlines is different. For instance, revising and writing multiple drafts is easier from a deadline-oriented perspective as drafts would be completed with plenty of time before the deadline. With a relaxed work style, drafts may only be completed a day or so before the deadline with less time to edit and revise.

Technology and Organizational Challenges

Time zones, language barriers, and cultural differences were the three main challenges that were seen across the survey responses. The other challenges were not as prevalent, but are still worth mentioning. Several participants mentioned how audio quality affected their understanding coupled with the language barrier. One participant noted the difficulty of getting a “shared server” that would be usable in all locations (Male 8). The same participant also noted how “sharing files or working from the same source files was also rife with difficulties and affected the software tools [they] implemented” (Male 8). Likewise, participants also mentioned difficulties related to:

- Holidays
- Quality Assurance
- Trust
- Ethical standards

These items were mentioned by one participant each, but were not elaborated on further by any of the participants.

Methods for Overcoming Challenges

The answers for how challenges were overcome in a virtual team followed a similar pattern to the responses for what challenges existed within virtual teams. Even though these responses were supplied separately by the participants, several responses were repeated. Furthermore, these responses can be categorized in six ways: communication and documentation, face-to-face meetings, communication tools, team building, flexibility and scheduling, and collaboration skills.

Communication

Four participants stated that clear communication and documentation of expectations, roles, and responsibilities helped to overcome challenges. One participant explained how they “make questions and answers clearer the first time, to write more simply to avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding (Female 3). Clear communication is asserted in virtual team literature by Yun Kim who suggests “simplifying communications by making them clearer, more direct, and more honest” (440). Another participant discussed how she doesn’t hesitate to ask for clarification (Female 2). Additionally, one

participant noted how in his virtual team “it is expected that team members will stop and ask ‘did you mean X or Y?’” (Male 4) Ask for clarification if there is confusion, but also clearly articulate expectations, needs, and responsibilities and to make sure that each team member understands what is expected. Communication helps to plan ahead for issues along the way due to unforeseen circumstances. In terms of documenting roles and responsibilities one participant would “write out detailed instructions on how to complete every task and ensured that the associate fully understood the task” (Male 9).

Face-to-Face Meetings

Three participants discussed how “the occasional in-person meeting, especially when new people are introduced to the team” (Male 4) would be beneficial for team effectiveness. Another participant suggested that “yearly meetings in regions for people to come together with the management” is useful as well (Female 1). Many companies try to mix virtual and face-to-face meetings if at all possible. For example, Texaron Technology, a textile-producing company, would meet face-to-face four times a year and would work virtually the rest (Riopelle et al. 249). Similarly, a female participant explained how she “thinks it would really help if I met the folks in India, but I’m a contractor with this client and sending me to India would not be a part of their business plan” (Female 2). Moreover, she realizes that it is expensive, but suggested that she would consider making the trip on her own if it was not so expensive. One participant explained how his company was able to “bring one Indian colleague at a time to the States to work for a given length of time (commonly six months to a year, or for the length of a particular project)” (Male 8). He explains how both cultures were able to better understand one another and the bonus of

meeting someone face-to-face after online communication for so long. Additionally, two participants were able to have onsite coordinators. One participant explained the onsite coordinator as “a member of the Indian team with whom we’ve developed a good relationship” (Female 4) because he a contractor and is located in their office. The coordinator, for both participants, lives and works in the US but communicates with the members of team located in his/her home country. For one participant, the coordinator works with teammates in India (Female 4); the other participant did not specify. In these situations, the coordinator understands the culture of the “offshore” team and is able to speak on their behalf while giving the US team members someone to discuss issues and problems with face-to-face (Female 4; Female 3). For instance, one participant explained how the onsite coordinator “has become very knowledgeable and more confident in asking questions and, on behalf of the offshore team, in seeking clarification of edit requests” (Female 4). This particular participant feels she has a better understanding of the Indian team and their culture through talking face-to-face with the coordinator.

Communication Tools

Three participants also discussed communication tools. For example, one participant noted how they “combine chat, a ticket tracker, and a private Twitter clone to minimize the amount of schedule shifting team members must do to stay in the loop” (Male 4). Another participant explained how her team uses “Skype, videoconference, and teleconferencing tools” to get the best communication possible (Female 4). Furthermore, several participants suggested using multiple methods of communication to keep team members informed. Communicating with instant message, telephone calls, e-mails, and

conferences (via phone or video) allows keeping team members updated while using each team member's preferred communication method. With access to many different communication tools, constant communication was mentioned by three participants. For instance, one participant explained how his virtual team used "daily status calls with strict rules of conduct to improve the quality and results" (Male 1). Another participant mentioned how his team would use "weekly conference calls for the whole team to give status updates, to discuss challenges or issues, or just to talk as a team" (Male 8). Likewise, he also explained how "short daily chats via instant messaging were immensely helpful" (Male 8). In these instances, team members would be quickly updated or could ask questions before other teammates would go home. Due to the nature of virtual teams, time differences and distance will always be problematic, but difficulties can be limited if team members can plan ahead and be flexible. Moreover, planning ahead and updating team members consistently should help with time delays as much as possible. Problems may occur when part of the team is unavailable, but daily or weekly update calls or chats can keep all team members aware of the status of any projects or programs.

Team Building

Team building and getting to know team members more personally was suggested by three participants. For example, one participant said to "personalize the people (names and photos) and join teleconferences a few minutes early to ask and share about personal matters" such as vacations, families, and hobbies (Male 2). Likewise, one participant noted "getting to know each other by personal things, hobbies, family" or playing team building games (Male 3). One particular game is two truths and lie where each team member comes

up with two true personal statements and one lie. These statements may include likes, dislikes, talents, or experiences. They tell the team all three statements and the team must decide which statement is the lie. All of these ideas are mentioned in virtual team literature where sharing photos, discussing culture, discussing personal interests, and celebrating together helps promote teambuilding (Anawati and Craig 50; Grosse 26). Another participant mentioned how “a past manager made a point of sending pictures of our team to our writers overseas, along with small gifts like candy” (Female 3). She further explains how the overseas writers usually returned the gesture and how there was a stronger sense of team bonding.

Moreover, one participant explained how “recognizing birthdays, company anniversaries, and other important dates” was beneficial to team morale and team building (Male 8). He also explained how “learning about the holidays celebrated in other cultures” was good for learning more about the team members (Male 8). His virtual team would conduct diversity celebrations to learn more about the areas that team members were from. In general, learn about team members from other cultures to “not come across as insensitive or do anything to offend associates in other cultures” (Male 9). In these cases, it is useful to “read up on their culture and review their newspapers” to better understand a team member’s background (Male 9). By knowing the culture of another team member, it is easier to find topics in common to talk about and to know when to be sensitive in their communication. For instance, two participants suggested being careful in communication with people from other cultures particularly with colloquialisms, jokes, slang, gestures, or visuals. Anawati and Craig suggest careful communication especially with slang, humor,

acronyms, and metaphors (47) to help with comprehension and understanding. Being careful in speaking and writing would help to ensure that all communication is understood as appropriately and correctly as possible.

Flexibility and Scheduling

A couple of participants noted flexibility in terms of scheduling meetings and to consider holidays. For example, one participant would hold his team's meetings in "the morning so that the associates in India can attend via a conference call" (Male 9). This participant also "asks the associates which holidays they will be observing and records it on his calendar" (Male 9). Similarly, one participant noted how she would "answer emails just about any time she's awake" and would "work a few hours on the weekend" (Female 2). She would maintain as much flexibility as possible to help with team collaboration.

Collaboration Skills

The majority of the solutions participants mentioned fall into one of five categories; however, a few participants discussed suggestions that were important and worth mentioning. For instance, participants suggested:

- Adjusting communicating styles
- Being patient
- Listening
- Assigning tasks based on skill sets
- Using Global English (or some standard language to communicate)

These suggestions are all beneficial for working in a multicultural virtual team and are notable to be mention; although, the participants did not go into much detail about suggestions and the overall impact they had on challenges within their teams.

Possible Preventive Measures

The third question that participants were asked is what measures they believe would have prevented challenges from occurring within a virtual team. Responses for this question were varied, but the responses can be categorized in four ways: training, communication tools, face-to-face meetings, and team composition.

Training

The most common response was intercultural training with 7 out of 14 participants agreeing it would help. Three participants noted cultural sensitivity sessions, which would be very similar as well. For instance, one participant explained how “intercultural training is important for all team members to understand the different ways of communication and work ethics” (Male 1). Another participant explained how “cultural training improves the situations, as well as training on how to communicate” (Female 1). This participant recognized that “culture drives the type of communications that work best” (Female 1) and is a strong advocate for cultural training because of that. Finally, one participant explained how his company “offers training classes in intercultural sensitivity and communication” (Male 6). Furthermore, this participant also asserted that intercultural training “is being incorporated into the curriculum of many college degree programs (both technical and liberal arts), either as a separate course or within existing courses” (Male 6).

These training courses are based in intercultural ethics. The purpose of the courses is to provide individuals with an understanding of the differences among cultures and methods and ways to promote respectful communication (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 108). Much of the virtual team literature discusses training and how important it is for virtual team work. For example, Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen discuss how intercultural training provides an understanding of languages and norms and religious differences (108-109). By understanding the culture of team members, it is easier to find common ground and be respectful in communications. Intercultural training may also be called cross-cultural training, but the purpose and methods are the same. While there is a lot of focus on intercultural training, technological training is also important to facilitate better communication (Berry 201; Dubé and Paré, “Global Virtual” 72; Grosse 24). Technology training promotes understanding of the devices and collaboration tools that will be used. If team members understand the technology, then communication is easier.

Communication Tools

Five of the fourteen participants noted communication tools as a preventive measure for challenges within a virtual team. For instance, one participant discussed how his virtual team uses a chat room but that they “could probably minimize the amount of confusion and miscommunication if they had a way to search and read past chat logs” (Male 4). Male 1 noted how communication tools limit “email trails and version conflicts.” Two participants discussed the specific collaboration tools that each used in virtual teams and what tools are necessary to promote the most effective communication. For example, one participant explained how important collaboration tools are such as “document

repositories, IM tools, [and] social networking tools” (Female 1). This participant also explained how Skype was beneficial because it allowed team members to see each other. Another participant was even more specific in discussing collaboration tools. He explained how the tools should have good signal quality and that is worthwhile to invest in:

Tools for instant messaging, tools for screen sharing (WebEx, GoToMeeting) repositories for source control, repositories tailored for collaboration (like SharePoint and wikis) with training to show people what the tools can do and how to use them (Male 8).

While the collaboration tools are not directly related to cultural issues, some cultures have a preference for certain methods of communication as compared to others. For instance, high-context cultures rely on gestures and non-verbal cues to obtain meaning in communication (Wang 154). For these individuals, communication with visual cues, such as a videoconference, would be preferred as compared to e-mail. In this regard, know and learn individual and cultural preferences for technology.

Face-to-Face Meetings

While face-to-face meetings were mentioned by four participants, no participant discussed how often these meetings should be held. The participants appeared to agree that meeting in person was beneficial, but did not have additional opinions regarding these meetings. While meeting face-to-face is a valid suggestion, it defeats the purpose of a virtual team as many teams may not have the available resources to meet in person. It is more important to determine the challenges that are faced within a virtual team and find solutions for these challenges using the virtual collaboration tools.

Team Composition

As with the other questions from the survey, participants had suggestions that were not easily categorized. The preventive measures that were mentioned were significant to virtual teams and are worth noting. For example, participants also suggested:

- Smaller teams (fewer than 8 members)
- Mentor/mentee relationships
- Willingness to participate
- Flexibility
- Openness to challenges

These ideas were only mentioned by one participant out of the 14. Each response was mentioned, but was not described in detail.

Advice for Individuals Working in Virtual Teams

The last question of the survey asked participants if they had any advice for individuals working in virtual teams. The purpose of this question is to help establish a set of guidelines for working in virtual teams and to give grounding on what character traits or resources need to be in place. The responses to this section were numerous with 41 separate solutions and suggestions mentioned. The responses to this question are categorized in five ways: communication, team building and cultural training, technology, character traits, and experience.

Communication

Five participants recommended better communication and adjusting communication skills accordingly. For instance, one participant explains the need to “communicate constantly” (Male 8), while another participant exclaimed “communicate, communicate, communicate!” (Male 7). Similarly, a female participant suggested that “management communication forums (weekly, monthly, or quarterly) are critical to the success for people to feel connected in a company” (Female 1). Likewise, a participant also discussed how “being explicit in communication reduces the amount of communication overhead and misunderstanding” (Male 4). Virtual team literature also recognizes the importance of clear and direct communication and understanding how different people communicate (Yun Kim 440; Voss and Flammia 81). Similarly, virtual team literature suggests adjusting communication by speaking or writing more directly, limiting idioms and colloquialisms, and being careful with humor and jokes (Anawati and Craig 47). For example, Anawati and Craig conducted a survey of virtual team participants where 80 percent adjusted the way they spoke and 60 percent changed the way they wrote in communicating with the team (47). Likewise, one participant noted the differences between the Eastern and Western cultures where it is important to ask the opinions of individuals from Eastern countries such as Korea, Japan, China, and Southeast Asia and try to limit the talkative nature of some individuals from more Western countries like the US, Germany, Italy, and Latin America. This notion comes from the idea that Western cultures are more “direct [and] explicit” as compared to Eastern cultures (Yun Kim 436). Communication is also important when it comes to clearly expressing goals and needs. For

instance, one participant suggests “being explicit about needs, desires, and expectations when possible” (Male 4). Similarly, another participant suggests “set clear and attainable expectations and goals” (Male 7).

Team Building and Cultural Training

Five participants also suggested team building and learning about team members and their cultures. For example, one participant stated that is important to “get to know the team as best as you can” (Female 3). Another participant said to “look for opportunities to allow people to get to know each other” (Female 1) such as taking pictures at events or having team members participate in a get-to-know-you exercise. Additionally, it is a good idea to “learn about the team’s culture” (Female 2). Learn about other cultures and team members, but be respectful of their communication style and culture (Female 3; Male 4). Cultures are going to have differences that need to be understood. In these circumstances, intercultural training is definitely suggested. Two participants suggested “invest[ing] in cultural training” (Female 1) and “provid[ing] additional training or understanding to everyone about the cultural differences” (Male 7). For instance, cultural training also will provide team members with background on different religions and how these differences impact behavior within a virtual team (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 109). Learning about the differences in culture is beneficial as the team is inherently going to have different personalities and cultural backgrounds, but these differences do not have to hinder effectiveness. As one participant stated, “you are a child of the universe, so act like one. Everyone on the team is too. There is no reason why a team has to be face-to-face” (Male 3).

Technology

Two participants discussed using the best available tools. One participant thought that investing in “tools/technology that aids in effective communication are worth it” (Male 8). Another participant said, “it is important to use the best tools available (Gmail instead of Outlook)” (Male 4). This participant asserted that better tools will facilitate more effective communication.

Character Traits

A large part of working effectively in a virtual team is having the right mindset and working well with other people. For example, several participants mentioned “being respectful and professional” (Female 4) and “being patient and flexible and positive” (Female 2). Participants also feel that individuals need to be team players, be approachable, take responsibility, and earn trust to work well in a virtual team. These traits and qualities also are seen in group settings regardless of whether they are face-to-face or virtual. Virtual team literature supports respecting other individuals for their differences, maintaining respect, and listening (Sadri and Flammia 268-269; Gross 34). By supporting the team, stronger relationships are formed and trust and team performance increases. Furthermore, there were numerous qualities mentioned such as patience, responsiveness, respect, flexibility, approachability, and understanding. These qualities seem useful for not only of virtual team communication, but communication with any individual regardless of distance or culture. Participants also discussed being mindful of delays, having a sense of humor,

practicing the golden rule, turning challenges into advantages, planning ahead, and getting to know the team better.

One team member had a positive outlook on virtual team work as he explained how team members need to “get used to it as it this is the way of the world and is a necessary part of ‘the Asian Century.’ More so, embrace it as an opportunity for personal and professional growth” (Male 2). This response is important because some of the challenges experienced may be a result of a team member’s attitude going into the virtual team. Viewing a situation as an unwelcome experience makes it easier to complain and be unhappy in the situation as compared to seeing the situation as a learning opportunity.

Experience

While all of the advice given in the responses is useful and valuable, there were a few that stood out as notable. One participant explained to “do what works for the situation” (Female 4). For instance, she explains that unlike many virtual teams, her team was not using conference calls. She was worried because her virtual team was not using the same communication tools as many others, but they were just as productive without them. It seems simple, but there is not a prescribed method for working in a virtual team, or any team for that matter. While guidelines and suggestions can be determined, it will ultimately depend on the situation and the individuals involved. Likewise, one participant stated there is not necessarily a right way to do things. There is significance to this statement as team members seem to need give and take in virtual teams where the team may not always do what a particular team member wants, but the goal will still be accomplished. Finally, one participant made a profound statement regarding virtual experience. The participant

explained that “it is important to consider that although working with a multicultural and/or virtual team can be a challenge; it can result in more work and more respect for our profession” (Female 2). This response summarizes why virtual team work is important. Working effectively in a virtual team enables accomplishing numerous tasks, while increasing the opportunities and respect for the profession.

Conclusion

Overall, the responses of the participants were very extensive and proved to have valuable insight into virtual teams from a technical communicator’s perspective. The responses suggest that while virtual teams have their own set of challenges, success is rooted, at least to some extent, in basic human respect and relationships. If teams are able to form functioning relationships and be willing to work in a virtual team, overcoming challenges is possible. Moreover, the survey responses give practical challenges that are faced within virtual teams and methods for resolving these issues. By examining these responses and the trends seen in current virtual team literature, it is then possible to determine not only preventive measures for ethical dilemmas, but to establish a set of guidelines for working in virtual teams.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to define ethical dilemmas present in global virtual teams. More specifically, the purpose was to find solutions for ethical conflicts and possible preventive measures. The current literature on intercultural ethics and virtual teams provides a basis of knowledge for the challenges that could occur in a global virtual team. An understanding of some of the challenges experienced by virtual teams is further developed by studying the survey results. The survey responses discuss challenges from a technical communication perspective and provide suggestions for handling ethical dilemmas. A better understanding of what challenges exist, why they occur, and how to resolve them in the best manner is created by examining both the literature and the survey. From this understanding, it is then possible to determine potential preventive measures for ethical dilemmas within virtual teams.

Preventive Measures for Ethical Dilemmas

The literature on intercultural ethics and virtual teams as well as the survey responses were examined to determine ethical dilemmas. These ethical dilemmas can be the result of time zones and cultural differences. Finding ways to mitigate these ethical challenges and prevent them from occurring is imperative. Global virtual team productivity and effectiveness can be hindered if challenges and conflict are not resolved. Five preventive measures were identified based on the survey results and a review of the literature:

- intercultural training
- collaboration tool training
- open communication from the start
- discussion of cultural differences
- flexibility

Intercultural Training

Intercultural training was discussed heavily in both the literature on global virtual teams and with the survey responses. Intercultural training helps individuals to understand cultural differences between diverse teammates and communicate respectfully across cultures (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 108). Cultures have their own acceptable norms and practices that some people may or may not be aware of and intercultural training discusses these differences. For instance, intercultural training courses may include a discussion on religion, cultural norms, or languages (Blackburn, Furst, and Rosen 108-109) as these differences may arise in a virtual team. When team members understand cultural differences they are better prepared for working with teammates from various cultures because they can communicate respectfully and honestly.

Communication Tools

Communication within a virtual team is improved not only by intercultural training, but also by training for using collaborative technologies. Many times global virtual teams are composed of individuals from different cultures who may be speaking second and third languages and have difficulty speaking and understanding the language. As a result,

communication challenges and understanding are limited before communication tools are even considered. For instance, using e-mail is beneficial because it allows team members extra time to compose a message, especially if writing in a second or third language (Grosse 27). In some cases, however, videoconferencing might be preferred because it is the closest alternative to face-to-face communication (Sivunen and Valo 51). Understanding the collaboration tools that are available and the benefits of each should be a common practice. By learning about the tools and how to communicate using the tools, more focus can be put on the explicit communication.

Open and Honest Communication

While it may seem obvious, open and honest communication is vital to success in a virtual team. Communication issues can be the result of language barriers or cultural standards, which may lead to misunderstanding, miscommunication, or confusion about responsibilities. Providing an open and supportive environment promotes honest communication as well as learning about other cultures and being open minded of the differences that may be present (Voss and Flammia 81; Grosse 34). Likewise, open communication requires making responses “clearer, more direct, and more honest” (Yun Kim 440) because such a focus exists for clear and direct communication to help promote better understanding (Yun Kim 440; Voss and Flammia 81). When team members are honest, direct, and open, teamwork is promoted and the team feels comfortable.

Understand Cultural Differences

Understanding cultural differences is central to teamwork and collaboration because an individual's identity, values, beliefs, morals, and opinions are all the result of national culture. Many times, an individual's culture background may explain why he or she thinks, acts, and behaves in a certain manner. The literature on intercultural ethics and virtual teams emphasizes cultural differences and their impact on ethical challenges in virtual teams. Cultural challenges within virtual teams were also discussed throughout the survey responses. Cultural differences can take many forms including the differences found in Hofstede's Cultural Value Dimensions. For example, some people are individualists who promote person needs over the team (Duarte and Snyder 57) as compared to collectivists who support the group first and the individual second (Zormeier and Samovar 227). These differences affect how people interact with each other and the conflict styles that people use. Similarly, culture also impacts whether a person is concerned about the relationships with teammates and business partners and appreciates small talk or is more focused on finishing the deal or task at hand (Goldman 118). Understanding cultural differences and discussing them early on makes it easier to know in advance what methods of communication someone prefers as well as why he/she may be very direct or very reserved.

Maintain Flexibility

Cultural differences, training, and open communication are all important preventive measures for ethical conflict; however, there is one more method that is beneficial.

Maintaining flexibility in planning and understanding that challenges are going to occur is the most valuable mindset. It is beneficial to have a backup plan and to recognize that schedules may have to be adjusted and communication may not be as clear and comprehensible as it should be. In terms of understanding, culture impacts communication styles so recognizing these differences and being accepting is vital for successful relationships (Voss and Flammia 81). Similarly, understanding differences in language and norms is necessary as there may be miscommunication or misunderstanding due to these differences. With flexibility and understanding comes patience and respect and even if conflict arises, it is easier to work through issues respectfully while understanding the other person's point of view.

Implications for Technical Communicators

This thesis has several key implications for technical communicators participating in global virtual teams. One of the most obvious implications is how important an understanding of global teams is for technical communicators. Virtual teams are increasing and will continue to do so. Technical communicators must increasingly understand how to communicate effectively across time zones and across cultures. The experience and knowledge about what challenges may exist and how to overcome them is invaluable because this knowledge is not only a marketable skill, but will promote better and more effective virtual collaboration. While an extensive knowledge of virtual teams would be beneficial, understanding the literature on virtual teams and intercultural ethics prepares technical communicators for the challenges that may exist.

A second implication of this thesis is the contribution to the literature on technical communication, virtual teams, and the ethical challenges that are faced. While the survey had a small sample size, the data from the survey is still beneficial because although it cannot be used to determine trends or specific guidelines, the data does provide challenges that technical communicators face. The results of this survey can be expanded in further research with a larger sample size to add to the discussion of the challenges of working in global virtual teams. This thesis provides a basis for some challenges that exist and how these challenges were resolved. These points can be examined further to see they are applicable as trends in virtual teams or otherwise, what trends do actually exist within global virtual teams. For instance, the thesis found that time zones, cultural differences, cultural norms, language barriers and technology all contribute to ethical dilemmas within virtual teams. Moreover, this thesis suggests that these challenges could have been prevented by intercultural training, collaboration tools training, open communication, discussion of cultural differences, and flexibility and understanding. The challenges and preventive measures that were suggested can be examined and tested against a larger sample population to see if they are applicable across virtual teams or if they only apply to the particular sample set. From the data found by further study, the trends will be apparent.

The final implication is how important intercultural communication is for technical communicators and the understanding that can be developed on ethical challenges that technical communicators face in global virtual teams. To date, the majority of virtual team literature focuses only on the challenges of working in virtual teams or on how to solve

ethical dilemmas and does not discuss preventive measures. This particular thesis not only looks at the challenges of working in global virtual teams, but provides potential preventive measures for these ethical challenges. Additionally, while literature on technical communicators and virtual teams exists, much of the literature does not focus on intercultural ethics. Instead, the literature is either for global virtual teams in general or specifically focuses on technical communication. This thesis starts to develop the discussion for technical communicators and includes what individuals in this field need to know when working with diverse global virtual teams.

Limitations of the Study

In terms of limitations of the survey, the sample size was the biggest limitation as it is impossible to determine trends and guidelines based on such a small sample size. While the responses provided are useful, further research could be conducted. Furthermore, the survey is limited by the US perspective as the majority of research participants were all from Florida. The responses given may be applicable to individuals from other cultures, but additional research with a larger population would need to be completed to fully understand the implications.

Extension of Research to a Larger Study and Interdisciplinary Teams

The conclusions drawn from this thesis were based on current literature and a survey conducted of 14 practicing technical communicators. These individuals were mostly American and living in the Orlando area, but there were two individuals from other countries. The thesis provides an opportunity to expand the target population in terms of

the survey and ultimately the trends. While the trends seen in this participant group may be applicable across the US, studying the challenges seen within global virtual teams with practicing technical communicators from across the US would also provide additional perspectives and possibly different challenges. Likewise, surveying individuals from all over the US would provide the opportunity for finding interactions with additional cultures and countries. For example, the current survey did not contain any participant working with team members in Japan. Expanding the target population to technical communicators anywhere in the US might provide perspectives in regards to countries and cultures not included in the 14-person survey completed in this thesis.

Moreover, much of the virtual team literature is from a Western perspective and more specifically, from within the perspective of the US. In extending the research globally, ethical challenges and preventive measures can be more comprehensive. While it is possible that the perspectives will be very similar across cultural lines, as discussed thoroughly in this thesis, cultures have very diverse beliefs and values which can contribute to very different perspectives. Conducting surveys or questionnaires in an attempt to find additional perspectives on ethical challenges would ultimately make the research more comprehensive.

There are three specific ways to expand the survey to contribute to the literature. One, research could be conducted on individuals that speak a second or third language in a virtual team. For instance, a survey could be conducted on team members who speak English as a second language and are working in virtual teams with native-English speakers. These individuals can validate whether phone calls are more difficult than e-mail

to communicate in a second language or if is the same. Similarly, these individuals may provide ideas for why there was miscommunication whether a team member talked to fast or used unfamiliar phrases. Much of the literature provides challenges and issues based on the perspectives of native-English speakers; although, there are likely to be differences for individuals speaking a second or third language.

Two, research could also be conducted on collectivistic cultures to determine their perceptions of challenges in virtual teams. While the difficulties may be similar, most of the literature discusses collectivistic ideals from a Western perspective. For instance, as was discussed throughout the thesis, collectivists are different from individualists in a group setting. What may seem as an indirect and vague response to someone from the US might be a way to avoid conflict for a Japanese team member. Furthermore, since the literature is so Western focused, there might be challenges for collectivists that were not discussed at all or important differences might not be apparent. For example, examining collectivist members in virtual teams could provide additional information on the technological tools that are preferred and why, preferences in communication style as well as suggestions for better communication. Few studies have focused on the experience of individuals from collectivistic cultures in virtual teams. By developing a stronger understanding of how collectivistic technical communicators view working in virtual teams, it is easier to adapt communication to be respectful, genuine, and honest and not accidentally offend or annoy them.

Third, the research could be expanded to studying other countries and cultures in general. As mentioned prior, much of the literature has a very Western and US perspective,

but expanding the research to include other countries around the world would provide valuable insights for the differences across cultural lines. For instance, some cultures are inherently more punctual than others. While the US is very punctual and a 9 a.m. meeting means getting there five to ten minutes early to greet everyone and set up, some cultures use 9 a.m. as a guideline and may arrive (or call in for a phone conference) ten or more minutes late. Looking at virtual teams and intercultural ethics from these perspectives would provide valuable insights for whether these team members feel rushed or looked down upon by their teammates or if it even makes a difference. Similarly, business practices, norms, and the views of women are different across cultural lines. From the US perspective, virtual team members should learn about other cultures and adapt accordingly, but the cultural standards may be different from a team member from France or Sri Lanka. Certain cultures may not work with females or are more willing to stay late at work, but may not want to come in early. The perceptions and standards from virtual team literature may be applicable across cultures, but further research into cultural practices and standards from a non-US and Eastern perspective would add to the literature on virtual teams and ethical dilemmas to find trends across cultural lines. All three of suggestions would provide a more expansive definition and application of ethical dilemmas. While the challenges presented in a global virtual team are inherently similar across cultures, each culture has particular values and views which may alter their perspective on certain situations.

An expansion of research could also include studying interdisciplinary teams that technical communicators are a part of. The research in this survey limits the discussion of

challenges in virtual teams to practicing technical communicators, but many virtual teams are multidisciplinary. While some of the survey respondents in this survey worked with other technical communicators, several respondents noted that as technical communicators they were working with individuals from other disciplines and departments. Not only are multidisciplinary teams diverse in composition, but these teams are likely to be multicultural as well. In these instances, overcoming ethical challenges to maintain effectiveness is even more essential as there may not be a high level of similarity between team members. Additionally, multidisciplinary teams may be specialized teams conducting specific tasks depending on the group composition. The variation in tasks may actually contribute to the presence of different ethical challenges as some tasks are more likely to be fraught with complications and conflict than others. Moreover, global virtual teams and multidisciplinary teams are becoming increasingly popular. Due to the popularity of virtual teams, extending the research to include technical communication and the relationship technical communicators have with individuals from other fields would benefit an even wider audience and would help to contribute to better effective global communication now and in the future.

APPENDIX A: UCF IRB LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Rebecca E. Blanton**

Date: **November 06, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/6/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Project Title: Virtual Teams and Intercultural Ethics: Preventative Measures for Ethical Dilemmas
Investigator: Rebecca E. Blanton
IRB Number: SBE-12-08759
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in IRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewska, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 11/06/2012 09:21:11 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: VIRTUAL TEAMS AND INTERCULTURAL ETHICS SURVEY

Virtual Team and Intercultural Ethics Survey

Instructions: Please fill out this survey to best of your ability and return it by (Insert Date). Your responses will be kept confidential, so feel free to speak freely. If you have any questions, comments, concerns, or choose not to participate for any reason, please let me know at rblanton@knights.ucf.edu.

Experience

Length of time in virtual teams (months/years):

Number of teams participated in:

List the countries from which you have had teammates in each virtual team you are currently/have been a part of. Please specify if these countries represent one team or multiple teams:

Number of cultures represented in each virtual team:

Challenges

1. What were some of the challenges of working in a multicultural/multinational virtual team? Discuss all challenges, but make sure to include cultural challenges.
2. How were these challenges overcome? What did you (or the team) do to mediate these challenges and to develop an effective and collaborative working relationship? Additionally, do you think that these challenges would apply across various disciplines? If so, why and which disciplines?
3. Are there any measures that you think would have helped prevent these situations? These measures can include training, additional resources, better communication, etc. Please be as specific as possible. Additionally, do you think the same resolutions and preventative measures would apply across various disciplines? If so, which ones and why?
4. Do you have any advice for other individuals working in a multicultural/multinational virtual team in order to have productive and effective collaboration?

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