A Report on Sabbatical Leave Research
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Jacqueline Layng, Professor
Department of Communication
University of Toledo

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Virtual Communication: A Critical review of studies over the last 15 years

The sabbatical was undertaken to conduct a field study to determine how businesses are using virtual communication on a day to day basis and whether using this technology improves communication in the workplace. During my research I discovered that I needed to develop a new measurement instrument first before I could actually conduct a successful field study and so my research shifted. Therefore, my research has grown to become two research studies on virtual communication.

The first study critically analyzes virtual research conducted over the last 15 years in which virtual communication played a key role. The study found that a definite pattern of criteria is being used when successful virtual communication is utilized in the workplace. This study is the first part of a two-phase research project and has identified the "success criteria" from current research on virtual communication in order to conduct a follow up field study with a newly developed coding device called the Virtual Communication Evaluation instrument. The second study will use the rubric developed in the first study to analyze if businesses are successfully using virtual communication or not. The following is a report of the advances made in this study during the one semestersabbatical leave.

The portions of the investigation that were delineated for the fall semester were accomplished. The conclusion of the investigation included identifying what "success criteria" is from the major studies in the field of virtual communication. The initial stages of this sabbatical were accomplished.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

First, the study required a review of literature on defining what "success criteria" is from the major studies in the field of virtual communication. There have been many studies and several new books examining managing virtual teams and the virtual worker (Johnson, Bettenhausen & Gibbons, 2009; Sobel-Lojeski & Reilly, 2008; Flatley, 2007), which discuss several different techniques for improving virtual communication. There have been many studies conducted in multiple fields from management to business communication analyzing virtual teams, virtual workers, and virtual distance (Andres, 2012; Lojeski & Reilly, 2010; Duarte & Snyder, 2001; Reinsch & Warisse-Tumer, 2006; Suh, Shin, Ahuja, & Kim, 2011). Communication plays a key role in this research but very little of the research focuses on the virtual communication aspect. Of course several factors (Technology Choice, Trust, Leadership, Culture, etc.) effect virtual communication and many studies do discuss Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) but few explore the true impact of virtual communication in the workplace (Qureshi, Liu & Vogel, 2006). Lojeski and Reilly agree that, "Communication problems strongly influence every aspect of virtual distance. They're the most insidious issue in today's global workforce and overcoming them requires a tireless effort by both team members and management" (p. 99, 2010). Thus, we need to analyze virtual studies that research the workplace and focus on the virtual communication problems and successes. This will help employers and workers improve their virtual skills by identifying
communication problems at an earlier stage and teach them how to correct communication breakdowns. Therefore this study's research question was: What are the successful strategies or criteria used in virtual communication in the workplace as identified in virtual research?

Originally, this was to be the second stage of my sabbatical project, but as I began my intensive research of hundreds of virtual studies it became obvious that the review of literature and identifying the "success criteria" had to come first.

STUDY 1: Identifying successful criteria from virtual research

This inquiry gathered hundreds of studies over the last 15 years that analyzed and discussed virtual teams, virtual workers, virtual distance and virtual communication. Forty studies were selected for critical review because virtual communication played a main role in their analysis. These studies came from a variety research fields but the majority from the Journal of Business Communication, the Journal of Business and Technical Communication, the Business Communication Quarterly, the Journal of Management, and the Journal of Management Information Systems. I identified the studies that virtual communication played a key role in the outcome through critical analysis based on the methodology used in Duarte and Snyder's 2001 book titled, "Mastering virtual teams: Strategies, tools, and techniques that succeed" as well as Qureshi, Liu, & Vogel study in 2006.

Duarte and Snyder identified four competencies critical to successful virtual teams: communication, establishing expectations, allocating resources, and modeling desired behaviors. While Qureshi, Liu, & Vogel identified communication elements and structures that help make virtual teams successful such as team and task characteristics, communication technology choice, management strategies, communication patterns and information sharing and processing (p. 59). Therefore, virtual studies that set clear rules or expectations when using certain types of technology, defined effective work completion, laid out general team norms and expectations, included time lines and specified team member outcomes, and used documentation systems met the criteria to be critically reviewed for this study (Duarte & Snyder, 2001). In addition, these forty studies regularly came up when the search string "virtual communication" was searched as the key term in academic research databases.

In order to critically analyze the virtual studies a clear definition of virtual communication is needed. Webster's dictionary defines virtual as "very close to being something without actually being it or existing/occurring on computers or on the Internet" and defines communication as "the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else" (online: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary, November 5, 2015). Thus, virtual communication is the simulated process of people exchanging information using computers or the Internet. A 2010 Cornell study defines virtual communication as using both synchronous (simultaneous) and asynchronous (delayed interaction) methods such as phone, audio and video conferencing, and e-mail. Virtual Communication can also be defined as "the process of transferring information, meaning, and understanding between two or more parties, and there is a huge amount of literature on how this process can be made more efficient and effective" (Berry, 2011, p.
For the purposes of this study virtual communication was defined as people using technology to communicate with each other when they are not physically face-to-face.

This intensive literature and critical review has made the second study now possible by creating the VCE instrument so an expert can observe and analyze how virtual communication is currently being used at major US businesses.

**STUDY 2: An Analysis of Business Communication in the 21st Century**

The purpose of this research will be to conduct a field study to determine how businesses are using virtual communication on a day to day basis and whether using this technology improves communication in the workplace. The objectives of the study include: interviewing business leaders who use this technology, observing and analyzing the virtual communication being used at a major US businesses, documenting the type of technology being used in these organizations, and documenting the success or failure of the virtual communication.

Accomplishing these objectives involves four stages of investigation. First, I will specifically identify a global company, a regional company and a virtual worker in a mid-sized to large urban area using this technology to be interviewed and studied. Second, I will set up times to interview and observe the technology in use and the virtual communication taking place at these organizations. In the next stage of the investigation I will analyze the data collected, conduct a comparative analysis and determine whether the subjects are successfully using this virtual technology to communicate. It is expected that both studies will provide interesting insights into using virtual communication in the workplace. I plan to continue working on the second study through spring and summer of 2016 and hope to have it completed and submitted to journals as well as national conferences by 2017.

The first study has already been submitted to the Business and Professional Communication Quarterly and off shoot of this study is also being submitted to the National Communication Association's annual conference. The second stage of my study will take place after my sabbatical since it became evident that my project was too large for a one-semester sabbatical. This sabbatical has been invaluable and allowed me to relaunch my research in a cutting edge direction, which would not have been possible with my regular teaching, service and committee assignments. I truly appreciate the support and plan on expanding my research further as my annual workloads will allow.
References


