

Addressing the Global Virtual Competency Gap

By Steve Gens MSOD and Deb Torchia MSOD

Summary

Globalization and organization virtualization are driving the exponential growth of global virtual work environments faster than most organizations can develop the competencies required to effectively manage the increased operational complexity. Having the competency to effectively manage global virtual complexity typically has not been viewed as a strategic lever to increase performance; however this is changing as organizations continue to struggle with facilitating cultural differences, effective virtual teaming, and establishing productive collaboration methods with external partners. Overcoming these obstacles requires a more focused strategic approach that proactively develops and applies relevant cultural and virtual skills across the organization in a way that integrates those skills into the day-to-day execution of work. Organizations that do not take this strategic approach often struggle with execution of their global business and operational plans, significantly reducing the likelihood that predicted business results are achieved.

Attaining global virtual competency

Through our client work and continuous research, we have identified a core set of interdependent competencies (see figure 1) that are required for people to successfully work together productively in this new and permanent global virtual environment. This competency framework can be applied at an organization, group or individual level, and can be used as a diagnostic tool, an educational aid, or as a development roadmap. The framework enables an organization to strategically focus on the specific levers to pull (green boxes) that will improve overall organization performance and business results. Initially it focuses on developing individual and interpersonal competencies to form the foundation for highly effective leadership, cultural competence, and appropriate technology use.

Individual awareness is a key underpinning of global virtual competency as the more conscious we are of our own and others' personal style and preferences, the more we are able to adjust our interactions with them to ensure more positive and productive outcomes. Increasing emotional intelligence and actively using self-awareness to appropriately adjust one's style to the situation at hand is a crucial first step toward developing global collaboration skills.

Being culturally competent means much more than just being aware of national and organizational differences, it means having the skills and ability to facilitate the co-existence of cultural differences to proactively manage the inevitable dilemmas global or virtual teams create. For example, there are many resources available to gain knowledge of individual countries' customs and protocols, however leading or facilitating teams that are comprised of multiple cultures, requires having the competence to establish collaborative group processes that work for all involved. Team dynamics are magnified in these environments so it is important to establish

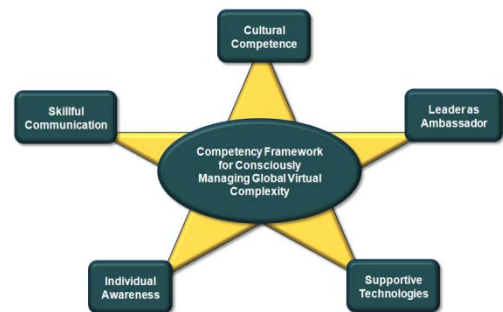


Figure 1: Gens and Torchia Global Virtual Competency Model

productive processes for new team formation, goal alignment, communication, decision-making, negotiation, and conflict resolution, just to name a few.

Having high individual awareness and cultural competence alone won't serve team members and leaders well if they are unable to communicate effectively with their colleagues. Skillful communication in global or virtual environments is all about taking the time to provide proper context, build shared meaning, and ensure that group members understand each other's contexts. Skillful communicators also balance advocacy with inquiry¹ knowing that more creative and insightful realizations occur when people combine multiple perspectives. This requires the ability to communicate clearly - taking care to make evident the meaning or lack of meaning—to ensure everyone is talking about the same thing whether in a teleconference, video-conference, web-conference, or e-mail correspondence where visual cues are absent or minimized.

Effective leadership in global virtual teams requires an “ambassadorial”² style and approach. These leaders are liaisons to group members and are highly competent in “bridging” geographic, cultural, and generational boundaries. This new leadership style fosters trusting, productive relationships among group members and supports the development of high performing teams. These leaders provide guidance around intentions and larger goals helping the group to form a collective identity that is recognized by others and aligned to the goals of the organization. They demonstrate cross-cultural resourcefulness and agility by respecting different value sets, encouraging other viewpoints, and leveraging cultural diversity to enhance innovation and outcomes.

The ever-changing technology landscape gives organizations many options to support working virtually and globally. The right application of technology is often dependent upon the business situation and cultural make-up of a team. It is important to consider team dynamics, cultural preferences, and the project stage (beginning, middle, or end). This will guide technology choices of voice-only, web collaboration spaces, video-conference, point-to-point video (e.g. Skype), or some type of combination. For example, a team comprised of French, Korean and U.S. members with established working relationships could most likely conduct a new project kickoff session over the phone or by web-session. Although the French and Koreans are more relationship based than their U.S. counterparts, their already established working relationship makes this technology a viable choice for their situation. Alternatively, if the same group did not have an established relationship, a technology choice of multi-point video conference would be appropriate since “social presence” or the degree to which the technology facilitates a “personal connection” would be a high priority.

Conclusion

The rapid pace of change driven by globalization and working virtually is forcing organizations to develop strategies to quickly build a critical mass of global virtual skills and capabilities. This requires a consulting-based approach that leverages both Organization Development (OD) methodologies and leading management practices to build lasting global virtual competence. The application of transformational change methodologies and a combination of appropriate business tools, processes, and training support increases adoption and raises commitment levels to ensure a successful outcome. This combined approach enables organization members to

¹ Senge, P. (1994) *The fifth discipline handbook: strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday

² Sobel Lojeski, K. & Reilly, R. (2008) *Uniting the virtual workforce; transforming leadership and innovation in the globally integrated enterprise*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons

translate awareness and knowledge into positive actions that will enable them to proactively manage day-to-day complexity and attain desired behavioral changes. This gives OD practitioners the opportunity to be a strategic partner with the business.

About the Authors

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