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## Working with Global Virtual Teams: A Case Study Reality Check on Intercultural Communication Best Practices

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## **Introduction: The ‘whys’ of intercultural communication reality checks**

It is clearer than ever that in our rapidly-changing workplaces, effective international business communication, increasingly in virtual environments, is growing in importance within many organizations. One specific domain highlighting this need is global virtual teams (GVTs). Specifically, GVTs may be most succinctly defined as technology-mediated, globally-dispersed work groups, usually representing different languages and cultures, and certainly presenting organizations with added layers of communication complexity that often aid or hinder in accomplishing their goals (Dekker, 2008; Rice-Bailey, 2014; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014; Wageman, Gardner, & Mortensen, 2012).

Organizations utilizing GVTs face multilayered complexities, including social and psychological factors in addition to the more obvious technical ones. Any team may struggle with the many managerial decisions at play, including purpose, strategy, roles and responsibilities, process, timelines and budget constraints, among others. To maximize successful team outcomes, it is critical that the right GVT leaders and members are in place and already possess or commit to developing the right level of intercultural communication competence. In reality, these skill sets, or an employee’s personal initiative to prioritize it as a development opportunity, are not likely top of mind as a GVT team leader considers a list of desired team members. This quest for balance in selecting candidates to enable successful virtual teams involves addressing both people and technology issues, not one at the expense of the other (Kimble, 2011). Places where intercultural communication challenges arise are not always visible to all stakeholders; sometimes these are subtle differences, but other times they manifest into serious shortcomings that threaten the outcomes of a given initiative. Even self-aware international business communication subject matter experts may be blindsided.

Drawing on the author’s presentation at the Global Advances in Business and Communication (GABC) and Association for Business Communication (ABC) Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America Joint Tri-continental Conference held in San Luis Potosi, Mexico in May 2016, this article seeks to tie together GVT theory and practice in the context of intercultural communication. It briefly highlights recommendations and strategies from a qualitative research study and then reflects on the challenges and surprises faced in putting them into practice in the workplace. The challenges are both organizational constraints and those driven by and observed through the author’s multiple roles. In this way, the article provides a unique pragmatic perspective on how well, in one illustrative case at least, research transfers to “real life” business. It further identifies some lessons for creating better conduits of this knowledge as it passes to various communication stakeholders. The qualitative approach also aligns with the call for more such attention to this methodology (Victor, 2012). It is hoped that this discussion

contributes to the expanding interdisciplinary focus of the field, from topical diversity and global reach to inviting the practitioner's voice.

Perspectives offered in this article may benefit readers in two ways. First, those involved in global teams in any format will learn select lessons and strategies for developing more effective intercultural communication. For example, consideration should be given to personal and social connections, team-building, belongingness, learning style preferences and support, perceptions of linguistic fluency and comprehension, cultural priorities, and technology and communication preferences. Second, readers are encouraged to reflect more deeply on their own influence in similar scenarios according to their own role(s) as researcher, educator, or practitioner. What are our blind spots when we are serving in these roles? What don't we see or can't we see, perhaps due to our role or our limited access?

To address these points, the first section is an introductory discussion of multiple roles that draws on the author's concurrent experiences as a researcher, instructor and full-time practitioner leading a GVT for a large, multinational organization (more than one over the course of the research spanning several years). It illustrates the conundrum of the often seemingly divergent "do as I say (as a researcher and educator), not as I do (as a practitioner)" messages. The second section is a brief overview of the author's research study which provides contextual support for the intricate complexities of intercultural business communication and collaboration on GVTs that should prove interesting in their own right to readers. The third section briefly introduces a GVT that was the impetus for the real-life reality check and sets the stage for the pragmatic focus of the article that follows. The fourth and pivotal section dives deep into a side-by-side comparison of six selected research recommendations from the foundational study with the author as researcher and the resulting reality check pragmatic commentary from the author as practitioner-observer. Finally, the article concludes with proposed mitigating strategies to address the noted challenges and also summary reflections on best practices and reality checks.

### **Multiple hats: Learning from various roles and perspectives**

One of the primary yet often overlooked steps in a project or initiative is consideration of one's own identity or role. Performing multiple roles can, on occasion, lead to role conflict where an individual may have obligations to different groups or organizations or where there may be misconceptions about attributed roles or contradictory behavior expectations of various identities or social positions, as described by role theory (Biddle, 2013). Interestingly, the author found herself playing several different roles throughout the time period covering the original research study and its subsequent case study: that of researcher, educator, and practitioner. While wearing these three hats might have been thought of as a triple

threat that seemingly covered all the bases, ironically this experience provided surprising insights, as described later. The situation is further complicated when conducting research within one's own organization, where shifting social identities and relational positionality between parties may influence outcomes (Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014). The author's experience with balancing the uniquely delicate role of an insider researcher will be discussed in the next section related to study design.

Awareness of these three types of roles can shed light on how different stakeholders interact and provide essential pieces to the puzzle. And though the roles are delineated here, it must be acknowledged that often their lines are blurred, especially when a professional embodies more than one of them. For example, researchers conduct important foundational work, drive towards revealing good data and valid studies, and can seek to package the findings for dissemination to wider audiences too. Educators and instructors, meanwhile, can learn to be aware of practical implications as well as good theory, and challenge students to consider what might succeed in reality and what pushback might be encountered in an organizational setting. They may form partnerships with companies to provide students with internships to get their hands dirty as well as serve as a liaison between universities and workplaces to test research hypotheses. Finally, practitioners with insider access or consultants with direct links to organizations may establish key insider connections, and dig down to reality by asking the right questions at the source. Pushing for more information and details on what is going to stick and be sustainable in a business environment, they may also create a feedback loop on the realities of practice.

There are, of course, many who wear multiple hats and seek more input. Researchers may find themselves wondering how their recommendations are received in the classroom or in the meeting room. Similarly, educators may imagine whether the best practices they instilled land better in some of their graduates' work practices than others. Moreover, practitioners and consultants may have mixed experiences interpreting said practices back and forth with their clients. Regardless of which of these one might be balancing, the lessons learned here from one team's experience might crystallize the challenges faced in positioning the work in global business communication to be best heard, absorbed and implemented for real change. Likewise, these lessons may help create a two-way channel of communication between interested parties in our industries and sectors.

### **Research grounding: An empirical study on GVT communication**

As defined earlier, GVTs are technology-mediated, globally-dispersed work groups, usually representing different languages and cultures. The movement towards more interaction through these GVTs is now a reality for many

organizations as the global workplace becomes figuratively smaller and more closely tied together with technological innovations. Potential advantages for operating on GVTs include increased flexibility, gained efficiencies, collaborative relationships, diversity of thought and improved talent management, among others (Bergiel, Bergiel, & Balsmeier, 2008; Daim, Ha, Reutiman, Hughes, Pathak, Bynum, & Bhatla, 2012; Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006). There is no doubt that such structures offer enhanced opportunities for business communication and resulting higher performance. And yet, the already complicated human process of communication is further entangled by the multiple impediments streaming from virtual work. These factors include potential workflow and time difference disruptions, learning to build trust and interpersonal relationships differently, maximizing diversity and inclusion, recognizing the need for different leadership styles, and not least, mitigating linguistic and cultural misunderstandings (Berry, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2010; Grosse, 2002; Kassis Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen, 2011). These and many other related challenges, to varying degrees of awareness, can be broadly encapsulated within the communication influence categories of language, culture, technology, and collaboration.

While the main focus of this article centers around a reality check of research implementation, it is first necessary to summarize the underlying research informing that discussion. The author's recent comprehensive study of GVTs, *Understanding Intercultural Communication on Global Virtual Teams: Exploring Challenges of Language, Culture, Technology, and Collaboration*, provides useful context for this article (Goettsch, 2014). That larger inquiry investigated differences in communication that exist among native English speakers (NSs) and non-native English speakers (NNSs) on GVTs where English was understood to be the *lingua franca*, or common working language. Four communication influences – language, culture, technology, and collaboration – were at its center. A hybrid framework was proposed, comprised of a dichotomy of intercultural communication (emphasizing Hofstede's national culture paradigm) and virtual communities of practice (VCoPs), building on Wenger's framework by accounting for the shifting nature of GVTs that increasingly resemble VCoPs (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Research questions included the following: "What differences in communication exist among NSs and NNSs on GVTs where English is the *lingua franca*, or common working language?" and "What differences relate to (*each asked separately: language, culture, technology, collaboration*)?" These research questions were selected based on their ability to describe GVT experiences from a holistic perspective while then exploring more specific factors – the four key communication influences of challenges for language, culture, technology and collaboration – at a deeper level for comparison between both groups of NS and NNS participants.

After carefully researching and weighing the advantages and risks of conducting research in one's own environment (Coghlan & Holian, 2007; Greene, 2014; Moore, 2007), the author initially chose her own workplace at that time, a large global organization. This was a noteworthy contribution in that workplace research settings are less common, due to the difficulties of outsider investigators in gaining access to organizations with which they are not affiliated. Likewise, much of the more recent empirical research on GVTs has been conducted in laboratories or classrooms rather than workplace settings (Dekker, 2008; Huang & Trauth, 2007; Karoui et al., 2010).

Regarding the complex insider researcher role comprised of observer, analyzer, and negotiator, the author was acutely aware of the magnified potential for bias in one's own organization (Breuch, Olson, & Frantz, 2002). The author had significant accessibility to people, processes and data within her organization at the time. And yet, her professional role could not easily be completely separated from her researcher role, resulting in the need to make a very conscious effort to mitigate any bias. For these reasons, although the majority of participants were initially from her organization, the sample population was ultimately expanded and diversified across 16 organizations. Additional risks such as legal policy red tape or unforeseen termination of stakeholder relationships were mitigated by using multiple sites. Moreover, to decrease the potential for bias, the author partnered with key expert advisors from several sources to reduce any perceived or real conflicts and enhance the participant population, research questions and interview protocol. In addition, an outside party provided an objective second viewpoint in the initial data coding process. Such conscious efforts to minimize bias carried on beyond the completion of the study into the author's continuing work.

The qualitative study was comprised of 50 participant interviews with NSs and NNSs at multiple global corporations who shared memorable experiences from serving on GVTs. Participants represented a wide range of countries of origin (17), native languages (15), numbers of organizations (16) across many diverse industries (12), and job functions and departments (11). Differentiation in terms of NS or NNS self-identification (42% NS, 58% NNS) and gender (44% male, 56% female) was split fairly evenly. Participants had varying degrees of professional experience in their fields and tenure at their organizations as well as differing roles and responsibilities on the GVTs (either leader or core team member). In all, it represented a large, uniquely diverse global workplace sample for that type of qualitative study.

Participants were interviewed for one hour about their GVT experience. The critical incident technique (CIT) interview method (Flanagan, 1954) was proposed because of similar GVT and global team precedent studies (Dekker, 2008; Kassis Henderson, 2010). After two pilot interviews in this study, however, the CIT approach was modified to semi-structured interviews and expanded with follow-up

questions to facilitate participants' ability to provide more detail and elaboration on their GVT experiences. The primary interview question was, "Tell me about a global virtual team that you have been on recently. Describe a memorable experience on that team." Follow-up questions included, "What challenges or opportunities with (*each asked separately: language, culture, technology, collaboration*) did you experience?" "Was your GVT an effective team? Why or why not?" "What advice or strategies do you have for someone new to GVTs?" Interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software and coded in two phases: inductive, open coding with the software, and a subsequent extensive manual recheck of the previous coding results.

Three key high-level findings for the study in its entirety emerged from the content analysis of the participants' discourse. First, while NSs and NNSs had many similar and different experiences on GVTs, NNSs had more challenges overall than NSs in the four main communication influence categories of language, culture, technology and collaboration. Second, language was a critical factor overwhelmingly noted by NNSs, as compared to NSs, that deserves additional attention beyond its link to cultural differences in general. Third, belongingness was a critical factor noted by both NSs and NNSs that should be leveraged for greater collaboration on GVTs. It is important to note that this article's limited scope draws on a portion of the findings and readers interested in more details of the overall findings may wish to access the full dissertation (Goettsch, 2014).

Specifically, only six of the many detailed communication findings and recommendations will be highlighted next in this article as the focal point in the research and reality check comparison. These same six recommendations in Table 1 below were identified as representative of many relevant responses and interview comments (number of participant responses are in parentheses with NS in the left column and NNS in the right column). In many cases here, several codes rolled up into one similar category and were combined or renamed as a recommendation for this article. While noting that there are many more analyzed in the larger study, these six are a fair representation of codes and responses across the four previously mentioned key communication influence categories (language, culture, technology and collaboration). As the researcher, the author viewed the six as important for fostering more positive outcomes (based again on codes, frequency of responses and supporting interview comments); and as a practitioner, her experience, intuition and observations supported their designation as key variables and as some areas for consideration by the case study GVT (hence the "reality check" focus for this article). Future rigorous research opportunities should perhaps be explored to analyze these as well as other recommendations by testing outcomes across different teams and organizations.

<b>Research Recommendation 1: Arrange face-to-face experiences</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal sharing/making connections (15 NSs)</li> <li>• F2F gatherings/kickoff as investment (12 NSs)</li> <li>• F2F ongoing – visit other regions/offices/proxy (8 NSs)</li> <li>• F2F socialization – get together/meals (7 NSs)</li> <li>• Fewer nonverbal/impersonal/video is not F2F (7 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• F2F ongoing – visit other regions/offices/proxy (23 NNSs)</li> <li>• Personal sharing/making connections (18 NNSs)</li> <li>• Exposure to/share cultural practices/interests (13 NNSs)</li> <li>• Fewer nonverbal/impersonal/video is not F2F (9 NNSs)</li> </ul>
<b>Research Recommendation 2: Leverage small talk</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal sharing/making connections (15 NSs)</li> <li>• Leader encourages participation from all (names) (7 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building relationships/empathy/understanding (22 NNSs)</li> <li>• Building trust/openness/goodwill/respect/actions (20 NNSs)</li> <li>• Personal sharing/making connections (18 NNSs)</li> <li>• Lack of confidence in conversational speaking (16 NNSs)</li> <li>• Exposure to/share cultural practices/interests (13 NNSs)</li> <li>• Friendly/open/inviting tone/natural interactions (8 NNSs)</li> </ul>
<b>Research Recommendation 3: Don't forget the individual</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working habits/preferences/individual styles (13 NSs)</li> <li>• Develop relationships outside of meetings (4 NSs)</li> <li>• Feedback for continuous improvement/evolution (3 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preferences for writing vs. speaking (22 NNSs)</li> <li>• Lack of confidence in conversational speaking (16 NNSs)</li> <li>• Working habits/preferences/individual styles (19 NNSs)</li> <li>• Directness/indirectness/outspokenness (18 NNSs)</li> <li>• Engaged members/matched with strengths (16 NNSs)</li> <li>• Open communication (16 NNSs)</li> <li>• Technology preferences (trust, access, proficiency, time) (14 NNSs)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognized/valued for own contribution (12 NNSs)</li> <li>• Spend more time 1:1 with participants (8 NNSs)</li> </ul>
<b>Research Recommendation 4: Increase preparation and support</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear objectives/planning/process/timelines (13 NSs)</li> <li>• Communicating with multiple people at once (10 NSs)</li> <li>• Document and revisit (decisions, actions) (5 NSs)</li> <li>• Uncomfortable/low level of communication (4 NSs)</li> <li>• Difficulty picking up vibes, morale, feelings (4 NSs)</li> <li>• Confusion (4 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preferences for writing vs. speaking (22 NNSs)</li> <li>• Multitasking/low energy and focus/distractions (16 NNSs)</li> <li>• Clear objectives/planning/process/timelines (13 NNSs)</li> <li>• Multiple communication inputs/reinforcements (11 NNSs)</li> <li>• Follow-up/consistent communication (8 NNSs)</li> <li>• Communicating with multiple people at once (7 NSs)</li> </ul>
<b>Research Recommendation 5: Pause and listen</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slang/idioms/colloquialisms/word choice (15 NSs)</li> <li>• Miscommunication/misunderstanding (13 NSs)</li> <li>• English as a second language issues (12 NSs)</li> <li>• Silence/hesitant/wait for pause/name (12 NSs)</li> <li>• Time/patience/energy/extra effort/empathy (11 NSs)</li> <li>• Asking questions or for clarification/repeating (10 NSs)</li> <li>• Accents (NNS/NS)/pronunciation/avoidance (9 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silence/hesitant/wait for pause/name (28 NNSs)</li> <li>• Repetition/rephrasing/clarification/frustration (NNSs 23)</li> <li>• Miscommunication/misunderstanding (23 NNSs)</li> <li>• English as a second language issues (23 NNSs)</li> <li>• Slang/idioms/word choice/sentence structure (22 NNSs)</li> <li>• Dominating conversations (7 NNSs)</li> </ul>
<b>Research Recommendation 6: Pay attention to the elephant in the room</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miscommunication/misunderstanding (13 NSs)</li> <li>• English as a second language issues (12 NSs)</li> <li>• Recognize/embrace wide range of differences (6 NSs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miscommunication/misunderstanding (23 NNSs)</li> <li>• English as a second language issues (23 NNSs)</li> <li>• Learning/researching cultural differences (7 NNSs)</li> </ul>

• Empathy/understanding/ embarrassment (5 NSs)	• Recognize/embrace wide range of differences (5 NNSs)
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*Table 1: Six selected research recommendations and corresponding codes with number of NS and NNS respondents*

While the writing stage of that comprehensive study progressed simultaneously with the author's team leader practitioner role, it had been in progress for some time and therefore she was conscious of the best practice research recommendations. Would it not be anticipated, then, that the research would lay a solid foundation to inform practitioner experience on a new team? Before moving on to an illustration of the transfer and results of this work, it is worthwhile to provide a clearer sense of the workplace team context that would prove influential in the degree of application of the research recommendations.

### **Pragmatic lens: When research recommendations met real life for one GVT**

The previous research section described some of the predominant factors in each of four key GVT communication influences (language, culture, technology and collaboration). As mentioned earlier, such research traditionally provides an "ideal" description or recommendation for best practices. However, application of practice in workplace settings – in this instance for GVTs – will be influenced by how an intact team works together; that is, the executed behaviors of its multicultural members, individually and cohesively as a group. Therefore, it is logical and desirable to examine these issues through a more pragmatic lens.

This section introduces one GVT selected by the author to be the focus of deeper reflection on how research recommendations may unfold in a real-life scenario. It should be clearly noted that this reflection occurred after the completion of the above research study data collection and analysis at other organizations and, in fact, none of this team's members participated in the study interviews themselves. The focus of this informal case study was a global cross-functional business project team dedicated to designing and implementing an all-employee process with the broader goal of driving an organizational culture change deeper into the company. The following closer look at their journey together reveals the dynamics of a GVT representing several countries, languages and time zones. Specifically, it explores how this team engaged to reach a sense of belongingness and collaboration beyond their multicultural, multilingual challenges and also how they could have made further strides.

There are some key characteristics to consider regarding the composition and nature of the project team. Again, this was a global virtual cross-functional initiative for a multinational company with several countries and languages represented from three global regions (North America, South America, and Asia-

Pacific). The project team met weekly over the course of one year and was comprised of different level roles, primarily from human resources and communications, but also information technology and business unit advisors as well as executive sponsors. This was a newly-formed project team, although several of the team members had worked together before on other initiatives so there was some precedent for personal connections already in place.

Also of importance to the next section highlighting research recommendations and reality checks is the fact that there were three noteworthy business factors for this team. They included shifting business priorities, demands on team members, and dominant organizational and national culture influences. First, the team and its leadership had to manage business priority shifts impacting the strategic and tactical direction of the project, fluctuating team membership, ebbing resources (including money, time and human), and varying levels of project and collaboration buy-in. The team faced many project challenges related to implementation and logistics, the nature of the industry and business operations, as well as technology and language challenges. In addition, there were significant new change management drivers such as a new project structure, new leaders and team members, a new approach and vendor, new accountabilities, and a new focus on organizational culture change. It is important to note that these business issues can and do take priority and are quite often outside of the team's span of control. Second, the team was affected by individual members' own shifting priorities and motivations due to their limited capacity while managing the competing demands placed on them. Most team members were part of more than one parallel initiative beyond this one, each with its own deadlines, strategic priorities and constraints. As a result, this reduced capacity and flexibility limited the ability to try new approaches, arrangements, or schedules as necessitated by timing and a global environment. Third, the organization was headquartered in the United States, so the dominant North American culture and language (majority native English speakers) prevailed, consciously or unconsciously. Interactions were influenced by an organizational culture which mirrored traditional descriptions of a national culture with monochronic, low-context and individualistic tendencies, pursuant to the work of both Hall and Hofstede (Hofstede et al., 2010; Pusch, n.d.). Undoubtedly, there was insufficient awareness of NNS challenges or an uncertainty of how to address them within the parameters of the team connections. While it may be clear to many that these communication and collaboration challenges are important, they may not rise to the level of urgency. This is similar to the ongoing struggle to integrate other key topics and initiatives related to the perceived "softer" skills of leadership and communication. The three factors above may well be familiar to others engaged in this type of work with GVTs.

In all, this team accurately represented the definition of a GVT with its characteristic advantages and challenges and was successful in meeting its desired

project outcomes. Drawing on this team’s experiences, the next section presents a high-level illustration of some observations, anecdotes and reflections from a global business environment beyond a simulated classroom or another scenario. The intent is to uncover opportunities for awareness and the difficulties in implementing best practices to improve communication to an even greater extent.

**Deeper dive: Six key research recommendations for effective GVTs and six companion reality checks**

As noted earlier, upon reflection, the workplace project team provided an interesting venue to observe and interpret the real life application of several GVT communication recommendations resulting from the aforementioned robust qualitative research study. The following six tables, with further discussion beneath them, link the previous two sections of this article and highlight the comparison between theory and practice. The left column of each table (labeled “Research Recommendation”) notes one of the six key recommendations for more effective GVT communication, representing a portion of the findings from the qualitative study: 1) Arrange face-to-face experiences; 2) Leverage small talk; 3) Don’t forget the individual; 4) Increase preparation and support; 5) Pause and listen; and 6) Pay attention to the elephant in the room. The right column of each table (labeled “Reality Check”) is a snapshot summarizing some of the actual constraints faced by the work team and how each recommendation played out, intentionally or not: 1) Need for buy-in and budget; 2) Let’s get down to business; 3) Out of sight, out of mind, out of time; 4) Limited time and project management resources; 5) Not understanding NNS challenges; and 6) Did we even see the elephant? As a reminder, this is a post-project reflection rather than a real-time experiment; in some cases, anticipating more of the realities could have enhanced the team communication and collaboration experience and raised it to an even higher level.

<b>Research Recommendation #1: Arrange face-to-face experiences</b>	<b>Reality Check #1: Need for buy-in and budget</b>
Hold F2F meetings if possible (once for the kick-off, at a minimum) to make personal connections and build trust	No travel funding allocated so kick-off meeting was virtual
Experience another culture first hand (e.g., arrange visits to other office locations)	Creative alternative solutions, too late for kick-off but not for continued collaboration

(GVT communication influences: Culture & collaboration)

The first recommended strategy selected from the research, that of creating face-to-face experiences for GVT team participants, is one that is also consistent throughout much of the literature (Bergiel et al., 2008; Daim et al., 2012; Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006; Grosse, 2002; Ruppel, Gong, & Tworoger, 2013). Holding an in-person kick-off meeting to launch the project (and ideally further subsequent face-to-face connections throughout the life of the team’s commitment together) will foster critical personal connections between participants and build trust. An ancillary possibility is creating the opportunity for team leaders or the entire team to experience another culture firsthand, perhaps by traveling to another site location away from the headquarters or another primary location. This across-the-board best practice suggestion provides a new lens for participants through which to view their colleagues as well as a deeper reflection into their own culture.

In reality, a work team is subject to many business constraints, often beyond the leader’s expectation or control. It may be a challenge to obtain higher level buy-in and funding for certain proposals depending on organizational culture precedents and current business climate. Authority to make decisions might be limited especially when it came to resource allocation, such as travel budgets or time away. In the case of this project team, there was no available funding for a face-to-face gathering so the kick-off was a virtual experience. However, there is often room for creative solutions during the life cycle of a project. This project team was a relatively small one, and size may play to an advantage or disadvantage. The team leader was able to efficiently and cost-effectively combine travel to an academic conference in Asia with a subsequent business visit to the organization’s Asia-Pacific office. Such an alternative afforded the opportunity to meet with the Asian team representatives in their own region and still benefit from some of the all-important face-to-face contact, albeit on a smaller scale. This first reality check demonstrates a key connection between culture and collaboration in laying the early foundation for effective team traction and communication and the need for planning and creative alternatives where necessary.

<b>Research Recommendation #2: Leverage small talk</b>	<b>Reality Check #2: Let’s get down to business</b>
<p>Start meetings with roundtable sharing to take time to understand each individual (the “person” behind the “employee”)</p> <p>Encourage ongoing sharing by participants of cultural information (e.g., news headlines, holidays) and show continued interest</p>	<p>Interest not the issue; rather time, stretched resources and dominant culture – more value on getting down to business, seen as respecting people’s time</p> <p>Small talk rare, only if someone joined the call early</p>

Create “shared stories” – or common bonding experiences – over time	Shorter meetings and full agendas for most efficiency, and ending early is highly desirable
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(GVT communication influences: Culture & collaboration)

The second recommended strategy selected from the research is leveraging small talk. Recommendations may include designating some time at the beginning of the meeting agenda for open discussion around smaller, personal topics that will help team members begin to understand their colleagues as individuals, rather than solely their professional personas. Participants should feel encouraged to share relevant or novel bits of cultural information of interest to them and create future conversation connection opportunities with others on the team. Such encouragement from the team leader and positive response from others will slowly create a set of touch points or shared stories over time, resulting in some common bonding experiences which will help to cement working relationships and possibly continued personal relationships. The shared stories and other related symbols (such as values and goals) can help build team spirit and collaboration (Sivunen, 2006). When team members have difficulty developing collaborative interpersonal relationships due to cultural or even linguistics misunderstandings, their group interactions may instead focus more on the technical transactions of the work at hand and deemphasize the often perplexing small talk or less familiar informal communication (Charles, 2007; Chen & Jackson, n.d.).

In reality, team members have different personalities, experiences and commitments. It can be challenging to create more than an expectation and rather foster an atmosphere of engagement, participation and genuine interest. For the project team, such small talk happened infrequently. In one rare situation, a few callers dialing in early discussed one colleague’s wedding plans. Such quick conversations generally occurred only if someone joined the call early. This was more uncommon since the meetings were scheduled first thing in the morning on North American time when many on the team were taking the call on the road in traffic or running into the office, for example. According to meeting best practices per the dominant company culture, they were intentionally set up to be the shortest duration possible for most efficiency, accounting for full agendas, and the fact that participants expect to be let go early if possible. In some cases, this last point is viewed almost as a type of reward (“We’re finishing up early so you get back ten minutes in your day.”). In another example, international holidays came up from time to time, however usually more in a practical sense (“Note that I’m out of office these days.”) rather than a bonding opportunity to take advantage of some intercultural sharing. In most cases, this reality generally constituted a time issue, not one focused on topical interest but rather stretched resources and the dominant team (and possibly organizational culture) not being comfortable with taking time

for this facet of interpersonal communication. Essentially, in this mix of diverse types of cultures, small talk is seen by many as not “getting down to business” and even possibly as disrespectful of people’s time. There may also be some related language discrepancies, depending on the topic and informal language used. While efficiency is understood as valuable in this instance, team leaders would do well to consider the message that is being sent and received – that small talk is not of the same value as other business discourse and is regarded as something expendable. In other words, framing small talk as another relatively easy way (in addition to face-to-face experiences above) in which to bond culturally and enhance collaboration is another recommended best practice.

<b>Research Recommendation #3: Don’t forget the individual</b>	<b>Reality Check #3: Out of sight, out of mind, out of time</b>
<p>Prevent isolation or disengagement by reaching out separately outside of regular meetings</p> <p>Reach out to participants individually to determine their team expectations (e.g., whether they prefer to lead discussions, be called on, formal vs. informal and direct vs. indirect communication)</p> <p>Offer participants flexibility in communicating (e.g., ask their method of providing feedback, status updates)</p>	<p>Some success but only when there was an issue to be resolved, and usually via less personal email or instant messaging</p> <p>Check-in phone calls just to connect were rare because of scheduling demands, especially in different time zones</p>

(GVT communication influences: Language, culture & collaboration)

The third recommended strategy selected from the research, which is linked to the previous one, is remembering that team members are first and foremost individuals. With a team mentality, it can be easy sometimes to slip into thinking of the group or the collective mindset. While there are advantages to this approach, and certainly national culture predispositions towards a collective mindset come into play, engagement may be individualized and therefore there are benefits to acknowledging both perspectives. Recommendations especially for team leaders include preventing isolation or disengagement by reaching out to team members outside of regular meetings when there is more time for communication, making personal connections to get to know them and their backgrounds, and also helping foster a sense of identification and belonging (Sivunen, 2006). From a work style

and practice expectation, it is advisable to connect with participants on an individual basis to also determine their team norm expectations. For example, this may include preferences regarding their participation and interest in leading discussions themselves if given the opportunity, their (dis)satisfaction with being called on in front of the group, and whether they expect or prefer formal vs. informal and direct vs. indirect communication with the leader and with their peers. Finally, to keep the lines of communication open and fluid, leaders should consider offering participants some flexibility in the method of communicating to the extent possible. While there will be some standards set for the team in terms of overall communications and documentation, positive results may be seen if individuals are also encouraged to stay true to their own personality and work preferences and styles, especially when it applies to additional channels and touch points outside of regular meetings. These recommendations are particularly important to consider where the dominant culture group is co-located in one office location and many GVT members even meet in the same room. While communication and learning style preferences are as important a consideration for NSs, they are more so for NNSs, a reflection that various cultural groups and individuals may prefer dissimilar modes and styles of communication (Huang & Trauth, 2007).

In reality, many GVT members are often “out of sight,” which furthers the risk of them slipping “out of mind,” both during meetings, when there may not be a visual representation or a frequent vocal reminder, as well as post-meeting when there is no close physical proximity – whether across the office building, across town or across the world. As mentioned earlier regarding the importance of squeezing in some small talk where possible, running “out of time” is a common challenge that can sabotage many best laid meeting plans. This case study project team had some success in acknowledging the individual in addition to the team dynamic. However, often this appeared only when there was some urgency, such as an issue to be resolved after the fact, which prompted a need for a quick separate communication. Usually this would take the form of a less personal email or instant message rather than a phone call. Reaching out for the sake of just checking in and making time for these types of more personal conversations about communication and learning style preferences, at least for the team leader, was rare. This was most often likely due to scheduling demands and particularly where the different global time zones made it exponentially more difficult to connect in real time. As a result, there were some missed opportunities for social connections, and learning individual styles and other potentially valuable linguistic and cultural inputs that might have added to the overall team effectiveness picture. In other words, investing time and energy in creating individual connections has the potential to impact several key components – language, culture and collaboration – of effective communication on GVTs.

<b>Research Recommendation #4: Increase preparation and support</b>	<b>Reality Check #4: Limited time and project management resources</b>
<p>Before: Distribute webinar presentations and other pre-reads to allow time to read, formulate questions and prepare feedback</p> <p>During: Use multiple media options for different language proficiencies and learning style preferences. (e.g., phone plus video or presentation software plus chat/instant messaging)</p> <p>After: Provide frequent and timely written documentation (meeting minutes, project plan updates)</p>	<p>No time for pre-read: Detailed communications sent but often agendas done overnight due to tight timelines and last minute changes</p> <p>Originally no project manager support to document key decisions and actions (now, yes)</p>

(GVT communication influences: Language & technology)

The fourth recommended strategy selected from the research concerns the problem of not underestimating the importance of frequent, clear communication, particularly when it comes to meeting preparation and supporting documentation and resources at all stages of the process. In this case, more is indeed better. To a great degree, NNSs in the GVT study preferred multiple information inputs where possible to absorb and fully process materials and learning (regardless of their preferred learning and personality styles). This includes considering both written and verbal formats, since layering channels is beneficial so as to not lose all social presence and nonverbal communication, even if writing traditionally has been preferred by many NNSs due to its asynchronous nature (Huang & Trauth, 2007). Once again, this recommendation is also applicable to NSs, for example in instances where comprehension challenges arise due to technology performance issues or a mix of unfamiliar voices, accents or global English. In terms of timing, there are recommended actions before, during and after regular meetings. Beforehand, distribute webinar presentations and other pre-reading materials to allow time for participants to read, formulate their questions and prepare feedback. During the meeting, consider multiple media options for different language proficiencies and learning style preferences (Nataatmadja & Dyson, n.d.) Often combining modes of delivery is effective, such as a phone call paired with a videoconferencing tool, or a webinar presentation paired with open chat or instant messaging. Equally important and often neglected afterwards is providing frequent

and timely documentation to capture the essence of the meeting discussions, decisions and reminders of next steps in a written format that is easily saved and reviewed. These recommendations, which also parallel some of general meeting best practices, are particularly applicable in global or virtual environments.

In reality, the challenge of limited time and project management resources hindered the project team from maximizing these recommendations. While aware in the moment of what more could be done in terms of providing adequate support and meeting preparation, particularly as it applied to NNSs, it often proved to be a challenge to balance time constraints and modify the approach. Unfortunately, in many instances, it was not possible to send out pre-reading materials far enough in advance from a practical standpoint. Detailed communications were prepared but often agendas were modified down to the wire, even overnight due to tight timelines and last minute updates. In addition, there was initially no formal project manager role assigned to the team and so until this was able to be rectified later on, the critical duties performed by this role were either absorbed by others or not executable. In terms of technology, here the team had more success with incorporating mixed written and verbal formats using a conference call line along with webinar presentation software that also included a chat feature. Where pre-meeting communications might have not been ahead of the curve at times, clear post-meeting communications and reminders were effectively used. While such a scenario may be common in many organizations, teams will benefit from considering up front how to creatively incorporate extra resources and time into the planning phase, knowing that this will help mitigate the influences of language and technology on their communication.

<b>Research Recommendation #5: Pause and listen</b>	<b>Reality Check #5: Not understanding NNS challenges</b>
Perceived language proficiency (nodding, agreeing, silence) isn't always full comprehension, so watch and listen for additional signs	Time and agenda drove interactions
Speak slowly and allow pauses (avoid talking over, allow more processing time)	Unspoken culture pressure to communicate quickly, correctly and succinctly to meet priorities
Listen intently and actively, admit lack of understanding and ask clarification questions	While miscomprehension was sometimes acknowledged, not clear that NSs truly understood challenges faced by NNSs, especially virtually

(GVT communication influences: Language & culture)

The fifth recommended strategy selected from the research is focused on the language and culture components of GVTs and suggests taking a moment to pause and listen in order to create some space for two-way processing between the parties. This recommendation applies to all participants, but perhaps in particular to NSs. Pauses and silence are uncomfortable in many cultures to begin with and adding remoteness without visual cues compounds the communication missteps that relate not only to linguistic competence but also the cultural meaning-making it encompasses (Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006). One critical takeaway from the research interviews is that NSs may perceive a higher degree of language proficiency on the part of their NNS colleagues based on some verbal and non-verbal signs they are observing, such as nodding, agreeing, and silence. This perceived fluency, of at least their variety of English, is not always full comprehension, so it is imperative for leaders and fellow team members to stop and watch and listen for additional signs. Another more obvious suggestion, yet one that bears repeating, is to speak slowly and invite pauses to avoid talking over others and to allow more processing time. This is particularly important in a virtual environment where the often inconsistent quality of the digital connections and lack of body language cues for turn-taking can create challenges. Finally, another key recommendation is to listen intently and actively, admit lack of understanding and ask clarification questions when needed. These steps will facilitate making situational adjustments and coming to mutual understanding (Charles, 2007).

In reality, the need to better understand the language and culture challenges faced by some NNSs was a variable not fully addressed on this project team. Time and agenda pressures – a common thread for this team and applicable to most in today’s business climate – can smother other team needs without conscious awareness. Also, with a fast-paced team, the unspoken pressure to be “on” to be regarded as successful and engaged is sometimes a reflected team or organizational culture norm, as was the case here. This can result in the perceived need, accurate or not, to communicate quickly, correctly and succinctly to get one’s point across and have one’s voice heard as part of the conversation. This appeared in the project team’s interactions (hence the valid recommendation for a collective pause to allow processing). Finally, while miscomprehension was sometimes acknowledged on this team (usually by asking for repetition of a question or comment), it not clear that NSs truly understood the myriad challenges faced by NNSs, especially virtually. The question of understanding and sympathy by NSs can be a significant challenge to address, especially if they have limited multilingual or multicultural experience. A couple of the NSs on this team were known to be perhaps more culturally-sensitive, with second language experiences of their own. However, the same cannot be assumed of all of the NSs (another reason to incorporate the earlier two recommendations for small talk and individual personal connections). In any case, there was no specific opportunity taken or framework provided for these NSs

to show their awareness or provide leadership. Once again, the goal is to carve out adequate time and space to implement these suggested strategies. There is clearly an opportunity here to help all parties, both NSs and NNSs, with mutual understanding of the linguistic challenges of serving on a GVT and how to instead leverage them for deeper communication and insight.

<b>Research Recommendation #6: Pay attention to the elephant in the room</b>	<b>Reality Check #6: Did we even see the elephant?</b>
<p>Be transparent about intercultural differences and working style preferences up front when setting ground rules and expectations for communicating</p> <p>NNS study participants in particular said don't be afraid to call out the intercultural elephant in the room. Ask about language, culture and other commonalities, differences and points of interest.</p>	<p>Trust was there but no time to focus or not top of mind like it should have been</p> <p>Generally no specific discussions about intercultural factors except some assumptions made (e.g., time zone adjustments, translation needs)</p> <p>Did not revisit whether to adjust ways of working together during project</p>

(GVT communication influences: Language, culture & collaboration)

The sixth and final recommended strategy compiled from the research for discussion is noticing the elephant in the room. In this context, the elephant represents all of the language, culture and collaboration signals that are sent to the team but which, in the speed and drive of the moment or if desensitized over time, may go unnoticed or, alternatively, disregarded. With the prevalence of GVTs today, many assume they will operate as effectively as any other team and members may not notice any unusual circumstances (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cohen, 2014). While the language barrier (and perhaps to a lesser extent the cultural barrier) is all too visible in many organizations, this familiarity results in its impact being overlooked (Kassis Henderson, 2010). These language challenges reach beyond individuals as commonly thought and affect organizational communication as a whole; in other words, language issues touch everyone (Charles, 2007). A key recommendation is being transparent up front about intercultural differences and working style preferences when setting ground rules and expectations for communicating. Coming full circle to the first recommendation, the team kick-off (ideally face-to-face) is where the leader sets the foundation for success and establishes team goals, roles and norms. This key convergence where team members become acquainted, establish important early personal connections, and

learn each other's strengths and aspirations, is also a natural and opportune time to begin acknowledging the elephant. In addition, one of the clearest messages championed by many of the NNS interviewees in the GVT study is that, despite some expressed hesitation on the part of NSs to initiate and engage in such discussions, NSs are open to discussing and sharing commonalities, differences and points of interest about language and culture and how best to collaborate.

In reality, the members of the project team would, in hindsight, have to ask themselves if they even saw the proverbial elephant in the room. Undoubtedly, it is often a matter of pausing and noticing, per an earlier recommendation. In this case, the prerequisite trust factor was already present on this team and it is quite likely that the team could have had easy and enlightening conversations on some of these potential facets of our collaboration related to language and culture. Unfortunately, the time constraint and other competing factors for our mindfulness discouraged productive steps towards increased team performance. Generally, there were no specific discussions about intercultural influences except for some assumptions that tended to relate more to logistics, such as time zone adjustments and document translation needs. Nor did the team revisit the current status of their progress and whether to adjust ways of working together during the project lifespan. In most cases, such a conversation would most certainly have focused on process and timeline issues in lieu of intercultural communication impact and improvements. And so, this final reality check demonstrates an opportunity for all those wanting to show leadership, regardless of their GVT role, to leverage this key connection between language, culture and collaboration by acknowledging team dynamics and having the willingness (and possibly courage) to initiate a conversation.

To be sure, when we consider the expected project outcomes, the team did have operational success and accomplish its targeted goals. However, is it clear where communication and collaboration was truly effective or not and the potential impact on further work together on this or a different project? Not definitively since, as stated previously, the discussion here is based on observations and anecdotes. Also, it should be recalled that there were many factors resulting in a significant amount of "newness" for this project team, perhaps distracting from some best practices. One future direction for research with the present scenario or a similar one entails interviewing teams for additional data collection and analysis. Furthermore, there are more than six recommendations emerging from the original research that could be analyzed in a similar vein. Nevertheless, this illustration reveals several implications for aligning research recommendations and practice.

## **Conclusion: Mitigating strategies and reflections on GVT best practices and reality checks**

While some of the insights revealed here may at first appear unsurprising, especially to those with greater expertise related to GVTs, the primary goal and value of this article, as noted earlier, is to provide a less common glimpse into the practitioner's perspective in order to benefit all vested stakeholders, in academia and industry alike. As continues to be seen in the increased attention to research and practice in this area, achieving effective communication on GVTs is a topic of much discussion and consternation in the search for continuous improvement.

To that end, the above practice observations suggest some potential mitigating strategies for effective application that are pertinent to GVT leaders in particular. First, one mitigating strategy to counter constraints for meeting face-to-face is early project planning, where the GVT leader should make the budget case and gather past success stories and metrics demonstrating the return on this type of investment. Yet another mitigating strategy, one to manage perceptions of inefficient use of time for small talk, is a conscious call-out of its purpose where the leader introduces small talk as a valuable and continuous part of the conversation and may loop back to previous stories to sustain interest. A third mitigating strategy, in this case to remember the importance of individual connections, is for the GVT leader to compile a simple portfolio of team members, including a plan of how best to regularly reach out to each of them. Additionally, one mitigating strategy in the case of limited time and project management resources, is to uncover creative options through prioritization and delegation where the team leader identifies essential resources and gaps and then requests that various team members share ownership for project support. A fifth mitigating strategy is to slow down and model good listening to balance the need for consistent progress while maintaining good collaboration. The GVT leader can have a visual self-reminder for pacing and also incorporate some interactive virtual knowledge checks or feedback opportunities, knowing that these are a few extra minutes well spent to confirm mutual understanding. One last important mitigating strategy is moving beyond simply acknowledging the intercultural elephant in the room to instead intentionally leveraging the elephant, so to speak, to build a high-performing team. The leader may consider recognizing the unique challenges and advantages of GVTs, invite others to lead conversations and share anecdotes, seek out training opportunities, and engage the team in how to draw broader organizational attention to intercultural communication.

Overall, the outcomes of this research and its strategic analysis and reflection as it applies to practice may have positive implications for a wide range of GVT stakeholders in organizations, including both NS and NNS participants, and indirectly their managers, fellow virtual team members and other colleagues.

These implications can provide the stakeholders with insight into potential barriers related to intercultural communication and virtual collaboration that impact the effectiveness of their teams and their own individual development. In this particular case, while the author entered into her responsibility as a practitioner already conceptually aware of the research-based challenges of GVTs, she was, like so many leaders, confronted with other competing demands and ambiguous circumstances. The specific realities noted in this article in many ways reflect the majority of organizations today who are struggling with the same nearly universal concerns and constraints of working harder and accomplishing more with fewer resources. Therefore, the need for mindfulness and awareness of a given GVT's challenges and solutions continues to rise.

As demonstrated in this intercultural communication reality check, best practices stemming from research may not live up to their promise. Reality checks can be sobering, but necessary and helpful in whatever form our business communication work takes. It is worth the effort to learn what real-life application of research looks like, especially, in this scenario, when the recommendations originated from study participants interviewed in different workplace settings. Researchers, educators and practitioners may benefit from reality check experiences by being aware of reactions and lessons learned, strategizing what to do with those valuable takeaways and with whom to share them, identifying the feedback loops in one's various circles for consultative insights, and considering how to leverage those opportunities in the future. For example, depending on role, one may adapt certain methodologies or best practices, refocus with a different emphasis on teaching or mentoring, and partner on publishing or other communication channels to raise awareness among diverse target audiences.

Finally, it should be reiterated that every workplace environment, every project, every GVT is unique – as individual as each team member. These opportunities provide much data for researchers to mine when accessible. At a minimum, practitioners in the ring are fortunate when able to find a moment for a post-mortem project review to examine missed opportunities and execution before moving on to the next one demanding attention. The next step calls for an even more reflective and iterative process; that is, looking beyond the boxes checked and into the deeper results and observations to capture how they can shape future initiatives if shared with others, as demonstrated by this GVT case study. This is a pointed reminder, perhaps, that business communication itself in a global virtual world is as individual and complicated as we sense it to be. Even though the perception is that the world is getting smaller and certain cultural elements are possibly converging due to closer business contacts, technology enhancements, and other factors, it is clear that we are making progress yet still have much to learn and share with peers. With increased awareness and collaboration, these insights from intercultural communication reality checks can be applied to new communication

research frameworks and best practices in order to reach GVT participants and other stakeholders with vested interests who will benefit most.

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